

# **Expanding Mount Rushmore**

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# **Expanding Mount Rushmore**

**Orrin Schwab**



# **Dedication**

To all the pioneers of computer science

Deus ex machina



# **Chapter One**

## **Expanding Mount Rushmore**

It was below freezing at Mount Rushmore, and it was only the first week of April. I had to drive around the park and check all of the exhibits for the Easter rush. The company was quite edgy about getting the holographic dramas just right. Technotronics had a thirty-year contract with the government, and they didn't want to upset the public, which would upset the government, which would eventually come back to haunt me. After all, I—perhaps the only computer geek who was willing, happy even, to isolate himself in the distant Black Hills—was in charge.

The company had promised me some more staff but, as usual, they were shorthanded. They just couldn't find enough qualified technical people who wanted to live in South Dakota. Everyone felt they should be allowed to live in Santa Clara, California, or Raleigh, North Carolina, or

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New York City and do their job through high-speed networking. But this job required a lot of on-site work, technical and mundane. Hardware failures happened all the time. Until IBM, Microsoft, or their partners developed completely self-maintaining physical infrastructures, humans were still required in the wide expanse of the Great Plains to secure the billions invested in virtual historical reality.

Still, most of the programming for the Mount Rushmore project was done in Northern California; Redmond, Washington; and Raleigh, North Carolina. When there were glitches that couldn't be fixed online, I, the maximum technician, would rush in with the technical know-how to keep the exhibit running and the public satisfied. All the time, I felt the constant pressure, the edge that came with the job; I had to make sure the visitors—whether they were from Brooklyn, or Tokyo—felt they were not just satisfied, but enraptured by their experiences. After all, they weren't cheap, these virtual reality trips. People had to join waiting lists and pay hefty access fees for the privilege of taking a virtual vacation.

I thought of all those tourists with paid multi-exhibit passes. They would look timidly at the landscape of mountains and forest and the endless sky of the Great Plains. Then the programs would start. Every time, you could bet on it, the imaging would stun them—giant figures looking, sounding, and feeling as real as flesh. All the material surroundings of the manufactured environment would envelope the tourists in a virtual universe.

Really, there was nothing more exciting than sitting with your family surrounded by the seventeenth century, watching the Pilgrims build their village on the coast of Cape



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Cod. Miles Standish would stride around as the colonists built Plymouth. The settlers would busy themselves with brick, mortar, stone, and wood cut from the fine stand of virtual trees in the virtual forest. They would laugh and belch and groan, and they would look and sound so real that you thought you could get out of your car, walk up to them, and touch their seventeenth-century bodies. Kids would squeal at the farm animals and the young Pilgrim children playing games, but even the smallest child knew that what they were experiencing was really an elaborate three-dimensional movie.

That level of sophistication had come with its price, of course, and now the government mandated that large virtual reality systems had to be set outside of major populated areas on federal or state property. Much was learned by the riot of 2017, when four thousand people were injured during a virtual reality display in San Francisco. The patrons thought that aliens had indeed landed in San Francisco Bay, and a massive stampede of people, one million strong, resulted in a huge number of deaths and injuries.

So that, and other incidents in Texas, Florida, and New York, forced Congress to pass public law 866 of 2018, which put holographic imaging technology under the strict control of the Federal Agency for Information and Technology (FAIT). As soon as the law passed, thousands of companies applied for government contracts. I was hired away from IBM by a highly regarded consulting firm named Technotronics, Inc. As soon as the company signed its contract with FAIT, I was sent directly to the Black Hills region to create hundreds of advanced holographic histori-

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cal monuments to the Western world's past and future. I was absolutely thrilled.

I just loved history, and especially American history. In high school, I was a member of the history Internet club. I programmed a score of what everyone thought were very interesting stories for my high school's network. I did a project on the American Revolution, and one on the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The best one I did was the Civil War. I researched the Battle of Gettysburg. Now that was a great project. My high school social studies teacher gave me an A++. I remember I worked my butt off. At one point, I even went to the library and read some paper books on the Civil War.

The park system had cooperated with the IT industry in setting up holographic exhibits not only in the vicinity of Mount Rushmore but in the hills, valleys, and plains of the surrounding park areas. The setup was the brainchild of professional historians, computer scientists, and corporate marketing executives who understood just what the public expected: to immerse themselves in virtual environments. They wanted to escape and be entertained. Since the riot laws kept holographic displays out of hometowns and private homes, our citizens could at least travel to national parks around the country and experience another reality.

The group I was expecting that day was a busload of high school kids from Great Neck, an affluent suburb of New York City. The kids were taking a college-level course in American studies. Stopping at the Rushmore complex, only part of their tour of the United States, would be a virtual reality history treat using some of the most powerful holographic simulators in the world. They would

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start by visiting with Oliver Cromwell's army in the seventeenth century for an English Civil War lesson. Seven holographic dramas about English and American history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had been programmed just for them. They would go through them in about three days and then spend another week experiencing scenes from the American Civil War, the Jacksonian era, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, and the invention of the microprocessor at the height of the Cold War. They were going to see Kennedy at his inaugural address, Vietnam War protesters, Ronald Reagan meeting with Gorbachev in Iceland, President Clinton facing impeachment, Rudolph Giuliani standing before the terrible ruins of the first World Trade Center, and, finally, President Clark signing the bill for the creation of FAIT. In ten days, these kids would learn a great deal more than their parents' money could buy, notwithstanding the fourteen-thousand-dollar price tag of the trip.

As they arrived in their hydrofueled, automated transport, I was reading the monitors on the exhibits. The Cromwell program was almost ready to roll. I can remember very clearly that as I saw the lights of the bus in the distance, I instructed the main system board to begin generation. The bus gently rolled to a stop. The front doors automatically slid open. The onboard system drove perfectly and parked precisely where it was supposed to. Then out the door came the three teachers in charge, the vehicle technician, and thirty-two teenagers all carrying their slim communication pads. The teachers, one man and two

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women, walked toward me smiling, recognizing me from the video calls made over the last few days.

“Hey, we got here, finally! A lot of traffic on the interstate, you wouldn’t believe it. Great to meet you in person, John!”

“Noah, good to meet you! And Alissa and Nicole, howdy!”

The two girls looked very young to me and like sisters or even twins. Well, they weren’t twins, but they seemed extraordinarily close, even mimicking each other’s gestures and words. They shouted, “Hi, John!” together, remembering our joking on the teleconferencing.

“Alissa and Nicole,” Noah gestured to his younger colleagues. “I guess you’ve already figured out that this here is our man John Cabot in the flesh.”

“Oh, wow, John,” Nicole said, a bit flirtatiously. “You look the same in person as you did on the phone!”

“As we discussed in our videoconferencing, ladies,” Noah continued with his introduction, “John is going to supervise the entire ten-day session on behalf of the Technotronics Corporation in Denver. Whatever we need in the way of holographic imaging, he’s the man to talk with. And John, as you know, Alissa and Nicole have studied quite a bit on the technology and the historical periods that the Rushmore Center is going to show us. And I would just like to say that we are very happy with all the help you’ve given us.”

Noah was long-winded, I thought. A bit pompous maybe, but that was okay. He was like that on the video-calls, too. The girls were cute. Somewhat bubbly in their enthusiasm, but that was the way they were on the phone,

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too. I thought we were going to have a fun time together.

“That’s great,” I said, in my best folksy Western manner. “You folks are all welcome and so are your kids. So we have here Noah Levinson, Alissa Berenson, and Nicole Bateman, is that correct?”

“Hey, you got it, John. Three aggressive New Yorkers out in the wilds of South Dakota. And don’t forget our resource person, Bill Cater. He’s in charge of the bus.”

“Pleased to meet you, Bill.”

“How ya doin’, man.”

Noah was in his forties and heavysset. His skin was sallow, and his eyes drooped a bit, but it was obvious from our conversations that he was very intelligent. His deep, sonorous voice sounded a bit like an opera singer’s. He knew the names of all the presidents and vice presidents, as well as the dates of all the wars and pieces of landmark legislation, important inventions, critical elections, and national crises. He was also current in world history. Without hesitation and with some relish, he could recite historical timelines for centuries, if not millennia, without breaking a sweat. There was hardly a personality, an event, or a process that had been recorded in general world and American history textbooks that Noah had not committed to memory. I figured that he was a formidable teacher, even though his appearance suggested otherwise. It didn’t take a world-class psychologist to figure out that he was in charge of the group.

Nicole and Alissa were in their mid-twenties, a couple of decades younger than Noah. They were sweet young things. I didn’t look at them with envy, just a small admira-

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tion for their youth. Not that I was old—no, the antioxidant cocktails and hormone treatments were ending the idea of old age—but you still aged in the mind, no matter how well you preserved your body's organs and cells. I was almost Noah's age, but I wasn't about to stop looking at women, and these women were cute.

The two young teachers smiled and babbled about how much fun it was driving through the Great Plains. They had never been to this part of the country before. In fact, they restricted themselves to the coasts and the occasional trip to Europe or the Caribbean.

On the other hand, in contrast to Noah and the girls, the tech, Bill Cater, was a completely different sort. He leaned against the bus while we were talking about the park and what we were going to do. He looked to be in his mid to late thirties, and I figured he'd had very little formal education. His tattoo—a Harley Davidson symbol—stood out against his muscled bicep.

I looked at the young women as they admired the tree line sloping up to the base of the Black Hills and the site of the old Mount Rushmore monument. Alissa struck me as just another beautiful woman, a pretty olive-skinned girl with a slender waist and a shapely figure. In the sun, her clear dark eyes glowed. She was the kind of girl I should have married fifteen or twenty years ago.

Nicole's water-blue eyes were directed firmly toward the students, and her straight posture—putting her dirty blonde head just a few inches above Alissa's dark one—projected authority, even though she couldn't have been older than twenty-five years old. She was beautiful, too, but not, I thought, my type. She was a bit too assertive, maybe a bit

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bossy. I mean, some men like that, but not me.

In any case, I looked at these two girls, and I shrugged. I'd seen babes before—actually thousands of them in a given year—but they all had one thing in common at the park: they were just passing through and uninterested in a computer technician bachelor living a thousand miles from a decent city.

Never mind, with the global network, the world was now as close electronically as an old Mexican village. Rural South Dakota was still what it was. It was never going to be New York or California or Florida, playgrounds for the incredibly rich. Information in all its forms was virtually free, but status accrued mightily to people who could live in the center of the large metropolitan areas, meeting face-to-face in elegant clubs and restaurants, surrounded by cosmopolitan multimedia.

Believe it or not, I had only been to New York once in my entire life, and it was too much for me. So much money, so much wealth and sophistication, I couldn't deal with it all. So when I saw this group from Great Neck, something hit my gut. It wasn't that I was envious of their wealth compared to mine, but I was envious of their power. I had this crazy idea that they looked down on me. That I was a cheap loser...a bachelor stuck in the middle of nowhere.

"It really is great to be here, John!" Noah said, beaming.

"Noah, I can guarantee you, if the next ten days don't change your life, then nothing ever will. You're going to love this place!" I replied.

A broad, satisfied smile came over Nicole's face. "I

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think this is going to be a totally fulfilling experience! There's absolutely nothing that can top this in terms of realism! I'd have to show one hundred movies and assign fifty book reports to get what I think we're going to get from this! It's utterly fantastic!"

Noah nodded, then turned to face the milling teenagers. "All right, ladies and gentlemen, everyone please come up here and meet John Cabot, our guide while we are here in the national park experiencing full-scale historical holography."

The kids, all thirty-two of them, wandered to the foldout chairs on the grass. Like teenagers everywhere, they came in a range of sizes from prepubescent to young adults, but all of them had an education far above average. A number of them put on bored faces, as if they were quite jaded. They came from one of the wealthiest communities on Long Island. Many of them vacationed in Europe on a regular basis with their parents. So I was a bit nervous looking at these kids and lecturing them on holographic imaging technology, that some would snicker, thinking that I was just a techie.

"Welcome to all of you. I'm John Cabot, the systems administrator and site manager for the Mount Rushmore National Monument Holographic Historical Exhibits.

"I've been working with this technology for eighteen years. I've seen it come a very long way. You are going to have the privilege today of seeing some of the best holographic technology in the world. I'm proud to say FAIT has certified Rushmore and the South Dakota park region as a platinum-level system plan. We are authorized to project holographic scenes in the neighborhood of five hundred



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trillion bits per second, using IBM superscalar, nanotubular, mainframe 9000 technology. Remember that. I know it's a mouthful, but it allows us to bring back to life, at least in image, an entire English army from the seventeenth century. Or the Battle of Gettysburg.

"Our exhibits range from just a few historical figures sitting quietly and talking about one of their issues to, as I said, thousands of imaged people in historical costume, modulating historical speech and looking in every respect as real as if they were here in the flesh.

"What all of you have to realize, and I know your teachers have gone over this with you for the last few months, is that the holographic dramas you will experience around you are merely sophisticated computer programs. These people are not real! They won't and can't interact with you. You have nothing to fear. At the same time, I don't want any of you falling in love with the holographs.

"Okay, in a little while, Oliver Cromwell and his English army are going to nonchalantly walk onto this site, right where we are sitting, and they are going to talk about the English Civil War. These Englishmen from four hundred years ago are going to look and sound and perhaps even smell real." The kids laughed at this line, I knew they would like the idea of smelling the soldiers. It was amazing that we were now able to produce olfactory effects with the holographic technology.

"But don't you believe it," I went on. "They're really just movie images following a script. Their only reality is that they're being stored on an optical disk about six miles down the road. So far, the computer scientists haven't

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found a way to put a real live human being on an optical disk, so don't you worry about your humanity. I mean, don't you worry that the computers are going to replicate us and take over. That just isn't going to happen. Anyone who believes that is just talking science fiction.

"The purpose of these exhibits is, first and foremost, to educate you, the public. You're here to learn about history in a unique and invigorating way. We also can arrange for different holographic scenarios according to your interests. Perhaps some of you are interested in the 1960s. We can model those exhibits very quickly and have them ready for you while you are here for the next week and a half. So don't be shy about any of this, don't be afraid, and keep your mind open to the experience. Are there any questions?"

A slim girl in front, her mouth pregnant with a question, raised her hand. She asked where all the computing power was coming from, and how the holographs were made. She also asked me to show her where the machines were that were to going to create the huge computer-generated scenes.

I pointed to a line of small, black, oblong disks, maybe five feet in radius, in the distance. I explained that they were controlled by a large mainframe six miles away and connected with the latest optical wiring, with transmission speeds in the thousands of terabits. The main storage device contained billions of terabits of data with access to many more exerabytes of information through the global network. I added that the historical scenes were programmed using many Hollywood movies as models for digitalization.

The first scene with Oliver Cromwell was a new exhibit.

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It was being shown to them as sort of a preview. Normally, hundreds or even thousands of live viewers would pay the park fee of seventy-five dollars per car to see a two-hour holographic exhibit. The system developers in California would use their feedback for modifications, I told the students.

The visitors looked up as the sky was suddenly covered by a blue light. The performance was beginning. Alissa smiled and whispered something to Nicole.

Looking at that group of fresh-faced kids from New York City made me hurt just a little. The loneliness that I kept concealed beneath the surface had me ruminating a bit with my usual self-pity. I sank back into my own personal virtual reality—my wandering, obsessing mind. How had I come to be where I was at the age of forty-two? Was I just a loser? I grew up in Lisle, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. My father worked for Lucent as a computer programmer. My mother was an English teacher. They retired and moved to New Mexico about fifteen years ago.

Personally, I was no longer impressed by virtual reality displays. As Cromwell's troops in full suits of seventeenth-century armor began marching in from the distance, something I had seen several hundred times over the last few months of testing, I wasn't in a state of awe or excitement.

As the holographs began to synthesize in the distance, I just went back into my mind, musing on my childhood. I remembered much simpler times, when the global network was just called the Web and people lived a slower and quieter life. Much could be said for that, I thought.

While I was daydreaming and feeling sorry for myself,

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the army approached from across the field. The students and the teachers grouped in front of their chairs and took out their cameras and digital binoculars. They let out the biggest whoops you could imagine. Smiles burst over their teenage faces.

That was par for the course when the exhibits started. But—unusually—I was dumbfounded, yes, dumbfounded, by the realism.

“Oh my God! They’re so real!” Nicole shouted, bouncing on her toes.

A couple of excited seventeen-year-olds, who were peering through binoculars, were practically breathless.

“Hey, they’re not holographs,” one of them argued.

Noah looked at him sharply. “What do you mean?”

“They can’t be, Mr. Levinson. They’re sweating.”

“Give me those binoculars.” Noah peered at the approaching army, which was now less than a hundred and fifty yards away. The temperature in the park had risen into the fifties, and some of the soldiers did indeed look like they were perspiring in their armor suits. Holograms do not sweat, normally. For large computer scenes, that required just too much memory. Noah knew that, and the kids knew that, too.

“You’re right, Jason, these are not holographs,” Noah answered before turning to face me. “John, are these part of the park’s historical drama group?”

I was somewhere between puzzled and stupefied. “No, they’re holographs...It’s amazing how real they can look.”

Noah looked at me and then looked through his binoculars again. He shot me the strongest look of disapproval I have ever seen on a social studies teacher’s face.

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“There is no way this is a computer-generated holographic exhibit,” he said. “Look through my binoculars. They’re on high mag, and I can see their teeth and the texture of their skin when they breathe.”

“They must be actors,” Nicole said.

Alissa, looking through her own set of binoculars, whispered, “I wonder if they’re going to perform a mock battle for us.”

I was now a bit uneasy with the situation. I knew that we were looking at holographs. Yes, they looked incredibly real. All my senses told me that they were in fact in the flesh human beings. But I knew this technology very well. I had seen other visitors fooled before, so I wasn’t worried. I looked at the monitor to see if the lasers were working. Yes, all systems were working.

Still, I was troubled by the certainty of my visitors. They seemed completely convinced that the holographic theater was actually a physical reality that they could touch.

“Folks, these are holographs,” I said. “They have fooled people before. Don’t worry. Nothing is going to happen. Just sit back and enjoy the drama.”



## **Chapter Two**

### **Cromwell and the Confederates**

My mouth went dry, and my knees were ready to buckle. There was an English army from the mid-seventeenth century a hundred feet away. The visitors were turning white as ghosts, and so was I. My dumbfounded wonder turned into disbelieving shock.

Oliver Cromwell opened his helmet. His expression was stern, just as it was supposed to be. His cavalry men moved on their saddles, scratched their skin, and watched the visitors. They waited for Cromwell's orders. The horses snorted and smelled like live horses.

I tried to collect myself. I tried to restore just a bit of rationality to the situation. Okay, maybe this was a practical joke staged by those Air Force guys holed up in the air base a hundred miles north of here. They had nothing to do while Congress debated closing their base, a relic of the

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Cold War.

I reached for my phone and clicked to speak to headquarters, but it was dead. I tried again, and nothing happened. No voice, no image, nothing. The teachers and students tried their phones, but nothing there either. My teeth began to chatter. This just couldn't be happening. It was impossible. The microwave wireless system just wouldn't crash. C'mon, this was the twenty-first century, the year 2030—those things just didn't happen anymore. I tried again, and again. Finally, after fifteen minutes, tears were welling up in the eyes of the young school teachers. I said, "Forget it." Nothing was getting through. But there had to be an explanation.

"Hey, excuse me?" I said, speaking directly to Cromwell. "I'm wondering what this is all about. Is this a joke that they planned to put on us? I mean, you guys are funny, but these kids are from Great Neck High School, and I think they're ready to fly out of their wits seeing you dressed up like that on horseback. Tell me, what's going on, fellas?"

Cromwell gave me a puzzled look. He didn't seem to understand what I was talking about at all. He sat straight up on his horse and spoke. "Are you loyal to the king?"

"Hey, c'mon, this isn't funny. Did FAIT pay you guys?" I said.

The schoolkids began to walk over and talk to the soldiers. A girl touched the armor of one of the foot soldiers, and he showed her his musket. The teachers walked right past me and began to speak with the Lord Protector of the English Commonwealth directly.

The commander in chief was cordial. "You are very



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strange. Your garments, your language are indeed quite foreign to us, but I have no quarrel with you. You come from somewhere, some land beyond the seas. England does not know you, but I will do you no harm.”

I looked at him in stunned silence. I couldn’t believe that this mounted general and the hundreds of soldiers and peasants standing around this student tour group were an acting company hired by the agency as some kind of publicity stunt. I looked around the open park amphitheater. If I wasn’t hallucinating, and believe me, I never used drugs before in my entire life. Yet the park had changed—drastically.

The trees were no longer North American pine. The flora was what I had seen in the English countryside when I visited Britain on vacation four years ago. Looking in the direction of where the Mount Rushmore National Monument should be, there was what looked like a small castle in the distance. I thought, somehow, maybe it was group hypnosis. I didn’t know; maybe we had been transplanted onto a Hollywood movie set.

But the more I smelled the horses and the flowers and the sweat, and the more I heard those guttural accents, the more it struck me that this was not a dream, but reality. The more I looked at these people, the more I got the impression that Noah and the students were right. The soldiers’ clothes were made from what looked like flax or hemp, the kind of stuff that was used to make large bags for fertilizer or 50-kilo bags of soy powder or protein rice for the worst parts of the Third World. Many of the soldiers looked like they were missing teeth, and they had strange-looking skin

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rashes. I could smell these guys, too. They hadn't bathed in weeks. Up close you could see the dirt lines on their necks.

This would have been enough to nauseate anyone, except that they were obviously not from this world.

So what was I supposed to do? I was speechless. All these thoughts came at me at once. It was as if there was a little calculator in my brain adding everything up. When the adding was done, I felt a pang of fear that I hadn't experienced since I was eight years old. It gripped my stomach like a vise.

Was I dreaming? Did I enter some strange dimension in the universe that physicists had been talking about? I decided whatever explanation worked, all things being equal, we were in serious danger.

By this time, Nicole and Alissa had spent some twenty minutes talking to Cromwell and a few of his lieutenants. I saw them chattering away, as if they were talking about nothing. But I knew what they were doing. They wanted to check these guys out.

Well, their folksy interrogations didn't seem to go well. The teachers began to look distressed, and so did some of the students, who were beginning to receive some hostile body language from some of the troops. Noah ordered the students back to the bus. He nodded at me, giving me the unspoken message that this was a testy situation.

Apparently, the Lord Protector was getting agitated by their presence. Alissa helped Noah move the students back onto the bus while Nicole and I kept Cromwell amused with a little small talk about the necessity of his army's quick victory against the Catholic monarchy. We assured him we were both firm believers in the Protestant faith. As

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soon as Noah and the students were safely in the bus, Alissa ran over to Nicole.

At this point, the best I could figure out was that this was some crazy group pretending to be soldiers for Oliver Cromwell. I smiled at Cromwell and told him that I and the two women were going into this bus to make sure that provisions would be available for him and his followers. Actually, I had every intention of driving to the police station fifteen miles away and reporting the incident. Nicole, Alissa, and I slowly walked to my parked vehicle and got in.

"I'd like to know what the hell is going on here," I said with obvious anger. "Just what is this all about? Where did they come from? What's happened to my communications?"

"Noah is furious, this I know," Nicole said. "I think he is going to demand a refund, and I am sure the school is going to get involved, too. There might even be a lawsuit."

"Oh no, Bill!" Alissa blurted from next to Nicole in the back of my van.

"Get in the car, Bill. We're going to get help!"

"Help for what?" Bill didn't seem know there was a problem.

"We're going to the police," Alissa said, sounding frantic.

"What do you want to do that for? They're not hurting anyone."

"Just get into the van! They're dangerous!" Nicole shouted at the bus mechanic.

"Then call for some help!" he said.

"Dammit, Bill, the network is down for some reason.

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"We're not connected!"

This made Bill even madder.

"Forget it! Go find some policemen or park rangers that will help you out. I'm staying here, okay? My contract says we're supposed to be here for nine days, so I'll be damned if I have to spend more time on the road."

Two armored cavalymen rode up behind Bill. We all shouted at him to turn around, but he couldn't hear us through the van windows. We pointed behind him, most likely looking absolutely petrified, and he pivoted around just in time to see the blade of one cavalryman's sword swing down and strike cleanly through the neck. Within no more than a couple seconds, his head was rolling on the prairie grass, blood spurting in a giant gush from his decapitated corpse.

The women gasped. Alissa leaned forward and threw up on the front seat. I shuddered, and as if I were on automatic pilot, I grabbed the wheel and began to drive toward the bus to check on Noah and the high school students. When I pulled up to the bus, I shouted out to him, but there was no answer. Then I leaped out of my vehicle and ran into the bus with the girls right behind me.

The bus was empty. Shivers ran down my back. One terror had been replaced by yet another. Where were they? There were no signs of force, no blood, nothing was broken. The communications network was down, but the engine controls were working. I locked the bus and tried to think about what to do. What had happened to them? Or did Noah rescue his group already? I was desperately hoping that the latter was true.

We had to get help. No sooner had I made that quick de-

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cision than I saw that the cavalry had made theirs. Through the windshield I made out twenty armed cavalry around the front of the bus. The looks in their eyes were murderous. Without thinking, I dropped into the driver's seat just as a sword struck the front side door. I punched the ignition, pressed the transmission system sensor, and grabbed the manual wheel. Powering the fuel cell on full manual thrust, I blew out of the parking space like a rocket. Cromwell's cavalry jerked away from the bus. Within seconds we were speeding down the road toward the park police station.

Nicole and Alissa sat right behind me hugging each other in fear. An hour before, they had told me how they had recently participated in a global videoconference at the University of South Dakota. They watched college students participate in an international seminar on indigenous peoples, like the Native Americans and the tribal peoples of Africa and Asia and Australia. The tribes of the Sahara and New Guinea and other remote areas were the last people on Earth without the magnificent international network, called the Internet or the World Wide Web during the pioneer days of the 1990s. Grandparents still used those terms, but it had grown far beyond that. The "global sphere," the "global network," and the "world system" were the terms used today. And every aspect of life was controlled by it. There were system sensors on everything from washing machines to toasters to medical equipment. Every phone, every portable computer, every car, bus, train, even some clothing had connections to the almighty Net. But now the system was gone. Dead as a skunk on a highway. For some absolutely inexplicable reason, we were completely out of

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contact with the network.

We drove to where the police station was supposed to be, but I couldn't find it. The building just wasn't there.

"Damn it, where is it?" I said. I knew I hadn't lost my mind, but the station was gone. I circled and circled.

Nicole asked me if I was so stressed that I didn't know where I was. Perhaps I had driven in the opposite direction.

Slack-jawed, I looked at her. I was panicked, but I wouldn't admit it. Sweat poured down the side of my face. I tried to make coherent sentences, but not with much success.

"John, you sound like you are going into shock. Can you tell us where we are going?" Nicole pleaded.

"How do I know?" I turned around a curve one more time and stopped. "I don't know what's going on. The police station was here; I've been here before. And now—" I looked around, and it was apparent that we weren't in the Black Hills. The sun was warm, and the hills around us were low. In the distance I could see a picturesque town of wood and brick buildings and an old church steeple. The relaxed ambiance of the place made me feel a little bit more secure. Soon, I was able to taste my saliva again, and my heart stopped pounding like a jackhammer.

We collected ourselves and got out of the bus. We were on a grassy field that looked nothing like South Dakota. Wherever we were, it wasn't early April. It felt just like a hot summer day, maybe the end of June or the beginning of July.

A group of men approached from the distance, walking slowly. We watched as they came closer, and their American Civil War uniforms slowly came into focus. For the life

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of me, I couldn't decide whether these were holographs or some unexplainable reality in which people from another time and place stared at us in the flesh.

The next thought that flashed through my mind was that this whole thing was an elaborate hoax. The perpetrators had a warehouse full of period clothing made in China. I thought maybe all of this was part of an ingenious game. Maybe Bill Cater wasn't killed a few miles down the road. It had been faked, and Bill was in on the game. Then again, I thought, maybe this whole scenario was a test of some radical new technology, and the company was using me and my unsuspecting tourists as guinea pigs. It wasn't beyond them. Those were the only things I could think of that made any kind of sense.

Soon we stood in front of five men dressed in the handsome gray military uniforms of the Army of Northern Virginia. They searched me for weapons but, finding none, concluded that we were no threat. The commanding officer introduced himself as a major in the Confederate army and said he would escort us to the headquarters of the commander, General Robert E. Lee.

We entered a house, which I soon learned was the temporary headquarters of the Confederate general. I recognized Lee from pictures I'd seen in my research and from testing the holographs. He was smoking a cigar with one of his commanders.

I looked at Lee closely. He stood about five six, I would say, with a full gray beard and the resplendent uniform of a Confederate Civil War general. Then I looked around at the house and the antique furnishings, lacquered oak tables and

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chairs, rugs made from wool, oil paintings, and bookcases full of antique leather-bound volumes. From the kitchen, the smell of molasses and chicken roasting in a coal-fired stove just about overwhelmed my senses.

The generals looked up at us and put down their tokens.

"Excuse me, General Lee, General Longstreet," our escort said to the two men with a salute.

Eyeing our clothing, General Lee asked, "Captain, where did you find these people?"

"General Lee, sir, they were found on the other side of town next to a very large iron wagon."

"An iron wagon?"

"Yes, sir, that is what we determined. We entered the wagon and noticed many strange objects. We do not know where it came from or where these people have come from. Our interrogation revealed that they are no danger to us. The wagon does not have military value; it was not made for military purposes."

"Thank you, captain." General Lee turned to us and demanded that we identify ourselves. "Who are you then?" he said intently.

Each of us answered in succession with our names.

"And where are you from?"

I answered for the group. "Sir, Ms. Bateman and Ms. Berenson are from New York. I am from South Dakota although I am originally from Chicago."

"New York and Chicago I am familiar with. But what is this South Dakota?"

"South Dakota, sir, the state of South Dakota."

Lee stared at me intensely. He seemed to be calculating the meaning of what he had just heard. The cordiality with



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which he had received us was suddenly replaced with a look of deep anger.

"There is no state of South Dakota, sir! What do you mean by saying this?"

I turned white as a sheet. "Well, sir, I see your point. But, you see, we really are not from around here. We are from very far away."

"Where is South Dakota?"

"It is on the northern Great Plains."

Lee softened his features. "The northern Great Plains is inhabited by Indians. Are you Indians?"

"No, sir, not at all. We are Americans."

"You come to my headquarters in a strange vehicle that my men have never seen before, and you claim to come from Indian country. I should think that you might be spies."

I held my composure. I had come to the necessary conclusion that we had to accept all of this as a strange new reality. "No, General Lee, sir, we are not spies. We come in peace. We come from a strange land in the future. You may not or perhaps cannot believe that, but, honestly, sir, that is true."

"You have to believe us," Nicole chimed in. "We are not working for the enemy. We are Americans from a distant future, and the wagon we have can prove what we are saying."

Lee grimaced and walked away. Longstreet and a group of junior officers who were also in the house looked at us as if we were ghosts. Lee drew up to Longstreet and whispered something to him. Their conversation lasted for a few

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minutes. They occasionally glanced toward us, the strangers. My guess was they were trying to figure whether I should be shot as a spy.

Finally, Lee walked back to where we were standing. He tucked his arm behind his back, to show that he wasn't threatening us. Then he began to speak.

"Indeed, you three are very strange sounding. You are also very strange looking. I have never seen women of such obvious breeding and intelligence look so worn and ill-clothed. I have also never seen such a man as you with such attire."

Lee touched my jacket. Its thin man-made fabric was waterproof as well as heat absorbent in the winter and heat dissipating in warm weather. It wasn't invented until the 1920s, and it was far better winter clothing than anything found in the nineteenth century.

"I can take you to our wagon," I offered. "It should explain a lot about us."

Lee shot back, "I'm not interested in your wagon. I'm interested in you. Just who are you people?"

Lee asked me why God had sent us to him today, while he was planning to send his armies against the Army of the Potomac to decide the war. Were we angels sent to test him? Were we here to warn him of the possible evils that awaited him? Just what was our purpose being there?

I was simply embarrassed. It wasn't that I felt stupid, but what was I supposed to say to General Robert E. Lee? I didn't know why we were with him, or why we landed here on the eve of the Battle of Gettysburg. I knew enough about the battle to advise him to stay off of Little Round Top and not to attack the main Union force on Cemetery Ridge. But

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then, I thought, if Lee took my advice, the Confederacy might win. But, then again, this wasn't really the Battle of Gettysburg, was it? How could it be? We didn't travel back in time. That was impossible. Or at least that was what I had been told by a friend who taught high school physics. Time travel wasn't possible unless you believed there were many parallel universes, in which case, perhaps, if you had reached a level of technical civilization far beyond what humans had achieved, you could find a way of jumping from one universe to the next. Then, maybe you could revisit Gettysburg or ancient Egypt or whatever, in a parallel world.

But all of this was absurd. I just wished—I begged God—that I could be back at Mount Rushmore now, walk right up to the faces of the American presidents sculpted in stone, and throw them a kiss. Not because I was patriotic, but because, if I was there, I would at least know that I was home, safe, and this bizarre nightmare was over.

While I contemplated this, Nicole spoke. "General, sir."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"General, we are here because something went wrong."

"What do you mean, girl?"

"I mean that we were supposed to be together with our schoolchildren because we are teachers, but soldiers came and took them away."

Lee was stunned. "Why did that happen? Your charges were taken from you?"

"General, we are from a very distant country. We are here because someone—we don't know who, perhaps God—sent us."

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“Not perhaps. God must have sent you.”

“Yes, God has sent us and we do not know why. We are here, and we are looking for our children, who have disappeared, and if God is good to us, he will help us find them.”

Lee looked at Nicole intently, especially at her blouse, which showed off her toned body. He seemed to understand that we were not of his world, and he offered us dinner.

Since we were drained and had not eaten in many hours, we accepted the invitation and sat with Lee and his staff at the table. We were served a hearty meal of roast chicken, stewed potatoes and carrots, sweet corn, and corn bread. There was French wine and local beer, blueberry pie, and coffee for dessert.

I was getting a little worried about Nicole and Alissa. They had gone somewhere with a group of women and come back wearing full-length dresses. Their shag haircuts were now rolled in curls, and they wore white bonnets. At the dinner table it was obvious they were making eyes at some of the handsome officers. In turn, the officers seemed to be flirting back. Since I felt responsible for the teachers' safety and for getting the kids back from where they were in this crazy universe, the last thing I wanted was for Alissa and Nicole to go native on me.

But no matter what I thought, it seemed like they had their own agenda. They laughed and made small talk with the men, and despite my cold stares, after the meal they waved at me and walked off with their new escorts. I was ready to blow a fuse, but I kept it in. They were young and fearless, at least with men, and I could imagine how hard it was for them to deal with this alternate reality. If this was their way to cope, so be it. In any case, I wasn't about to

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walk up to their escorts and challenge the men to a fight. The soldiers were armed and had their own troops to protect them.

Instead, I settled into the living room to talk with Lee and Longstreet.

“You look like a fair man, Mr. Cabot.” Lee sat back in his chair smoking his cigar. “I know I asked you before, but can you tell me once more why you are here with us? You know I am a very busy man these days. General Longstreet and I are planning to wage a decisive battle for the future of our country...I would like you tell me why has God sent you here.”

This time, I was ready with my answer. “General, sir, I don’t know why God has sent me to you. I am telling you the truth when I say I am from a place you have never heard of. I do not have any supernatural powers, but I believe I have some insight into the power of God.”

“You have insight.” Lee nodded.

“Sir, may I interrupt?” Longstreet, who had been listening patiently, was leaning forward, as if bursting with curiosity. “Mr. Cabot, your wagon was inspected by my officers in great detail. I myself entered it and noticed the extremely fine mechanical work. It is clear to me that your wagon is not a civilian machine. The speed that we think it is capable of and the force that it can bear is beyond anything that our engineers have ever seen or would even be able to construct. Clearly, this machine if properly deployed would be an extraordinary weapon.”

Lee turned to his second in command. “Are you suggesting, General Longstreet, that we requisition this wagon for

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use against the federal army?"

"I am suggesting that, sir."

This made me a little flustered. "Please forgive me, sirs, but this wagon is not a military machine. It is an ordinary transport vehicle that was being used to take school children around the country in my time and place. We call it a bus. I don't think you should requisition it because you don't understand it. You may think that it will give you advantages against the Yankees, but I think their large cannons are fully capable of blowing my wagon apart. And I don't think God wants you to have this wagon."

"Why not, sir?" Lee challenged. "We can use this vehicle to lead our troops forward to the Union lines. It will disrupt their defense and allow my troops an advantage in the field. I don't see why it would not work."

"But, sir, does God want you to take this vehicle?" In desperation, I became more articulate. "If God were to give you this vehicle, he would be giving you something that does not belong in your world. And by taking it, you would show him that you are not true to your principles of honor."

"God has sent you to tell us that we should not be tempted?"

"I think so, General."

Lee looked at Longstreet for a moment, and then they both got up. "Excuse us, Mr. Cabot, sir, we need to confer."

I nodded.

The two officers walked to the far end of the room and carried on an animated conversation, occasionally looking back at me. Longstreet looked like he disbelieved me and was making an argument for taking the bus. Lee, however, appeared unconvinced. Watching him closely, I could see

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that Lee was rejecting Longstreet's views. Finally, they returned to where I sat.

"Tomorrow, we shall move forward to approach the place where the Union armies are gathering to meet us." Longstreet began. "But you are right, sir. If we were to take your iron wagon with its extraordinary mechanical powers, we would be at a loss to use it. Perhaps it is God's will to tempt us with this potential force. Perhaps, sir, you and your ladies are indeed apparitions sent by God to test us. If that is so, we should not be tempted. Only God can win this final victory. If we were to take your wagon, we would most certainly be at great risk of violating the laws of our Heavenly King. He may have sent you in the forms that you have taken to show us how much courage and pride are the essential elements of war. If we fight this war for the right of our people to make their own decisions over their lives and properties, perhaps then we would be closer to God if we did not requisition your wagon."

When he said that, I felt a ton of bricks removed from the top of my forehead. To an extent, this brilliant man from the nineteenth century thought we were somehow explainable. He believed we had been sent by God to help him, and I was almost floating. "Thank you, General Lee. We will leave as soon as possible. I have no doubt your soldiers will do honor to their country."

Lee nodded. Then he gave an order. "At the first sight of dawn tomorrow, you and your women will move on with your iron wagon. You will leave this area—indeed you will leave Pennsylvania—and you will find your way back to where you have come from. We are honorable men, Mr.

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Cabot. You must understand that we could never take advantage of you. We are committed with God's will to engage the enemy this first of July and to destroy him. We will end this war, and soldiers will be blessed by our victory."

I nodded but remained secretly panicked. Where would we go in the morning? Were we really in the nineteenth century at the Battle of Gettysburg? I was trying to figure this out, but I couldn't. I had read all about parallel universes and higher dimensions that those super intelligent theoretical physicists had written about. What was it called—superstrings, brane theory? I didn't know. I was an expert on hardware and I knew something about software. So the question was, could this be explained by some really advanced computer technology that had gotten out of control, and I, the systems admin for Mount Rushmore, was out of the loop? Or...well, at that point I just had no idea.

In the morning the women came back clean and relaxed and wearing their own clothes. Alissa pushed her thick brown hair back from her forehead and had an almost bored look on her face. Nicole looked at me with a calm demeanor. They had nothing to say.

It was clear to me that we had to leave—immediately. We had to find our way out of this thing. There had to be some explanation for all of this. Again I wondered if it was all part of some elaborate hoax. Maybe we were being drugged and subjected to some ultra-powerful new technology that was creating this collective illusion. After all, how could we have traveled back in time to the American Civil War with a fifty thousand-pound motor coach? Did that make any sense?



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We bid farewell to General Lee and his staff. They saluted me and kissed the hands of the girls. Then we were provided a military escort back to the bus. As soon as the doors closed, Nicole whispered to me to get the vehicle moving. I pressed on the hydrogen fuel system and cranked up the manual steering controls. We waved to the cavalry, and they rode down the dirt road through a thick forest of Eastern pine trees. Within seconds of entering the forest, the girls' looks softened. We were safe.

"What was wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing really." Nicole looked tired. "They were nice to us, but they went a little too far."

"What do you mean?"

"They wanted to marry us." Alissa tossed her head.

"Oh my God, you've got be kidding!"

"No, Alissa is right," Nicole chimed in. "They wanted to take us to the church and tie the knot, and once the war was over, they wanted to bring us back to ole Virginia."

"Well, aren't you glad you're still with me."

They both laughed at that. No one thought I had a sense of humor.



## **Chapter Three**

### **The Psychoanalysts**

We drove for almost two hours. By my reckoning we should have been at least a hundred miles southwest of the national park, somewhere in Nebraska or Colorado. But the road and the landscape was nothing like the American West. We hadn't seen a soul on this highway, which I never knew existed. Nicole and Alissa had brought fruit, fresh bread, and some homemade butter from one of the stores in Gettysburg. Apparently, the women in the store stared at them, gave them whatever they wanted, and wouldn't take any money with the soldiers nearby.

"We just walked in and loaded up our baskets," Nicole said. "You know, John, I know you don't know what happened back at the park, but to me we just drove somewhere and we're here."

"But where is here?" I asked.

Nicole gave me a sly look. "I think we're still in the park

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or the vicinity of it. I don't think we've been transported to another planet or into another universe or back in time."

"So where are we now?" Alissa pointed to a group of snowcapped mountains directly in front of us.

"Could be the front range of the Rockies," I said. I knew the front range of Rockies very well. For a moment I thought we were back in the present. "It looks like we're due north of Fort Collins."

"Fort Collins, Colorado?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm thinking. That's about five hundred miles from Mount Rushmore, but I figure that probably is where we are."

Something caught Alissa's eye. "Look there's a man over there."

Her finger drew my attention to a man slumping against a modern off-road vehicle, and I slowed down to get a better look. He wasn't armed, and he looked exhausted. He had been driving in the opposite direction, and as we approached, he ran quickly across the road.

As we got closer, his eyes darted straight at us, and he began to wave, finally he started running toward us. I stopped just as he leaped in front of the bus. He made a big sign with his hands, waving at us in a circle, as if he wanted to make sure we weren't going to leave him. He looked like he was in his early thirties. He had short, wavy dark hair, dark eyes, and a thin wiry build. He looked about six feet tall and was wearing a black leather jacket that looked like it had been slept in. I could see the fatigue all over his face. His eyes seemed to be asking for sleep. I opened the door to the bus to speak to him.

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“Hello. How ya doin’, man? Are you a real person?” I said.

“Sure, I’m a full-blooded human being. Name’s David Krohl. I’m utterly tired and exhausted; I haven’t slept in a week. And you?”

“Us? We’re just like you, buddy. We don’t know what is going on.”

“I don’t know what’s going on, either.”

“Where are you from?”

“Los Alamos, New Mexico.”

I was a little puzzled. “Los Alamos? Wow, what are you doing here? And by the way where is here, Colorado?”

“You think we’re in Colorado?”

“We don’t know, man. We don’t know anything for sure.”

“I don’t know either. I think something happened at Los Alamos that you wouldn’t believe...I’m a computer scientist there for FAIT and the Department of Defense...I could explain it to you, but...let’s just say something happened with the supercomputers...There’s been some kind of computer revolution, and they’ve taken over.”

This jolted me to my core. I knew something like that was a possibility, but to hear someone else say it was a shock. The girls’ faces lost color immediately. They gave Krohl looks that seemed a mixture of sadness and desperation. Then Nicole began shooting questions at him, but I told her to stop.

“Why don’t you get in?” I asked.

We settled him into the bus with some lemonade and bread.

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His jeep had run out of fuel. He had been traveling for a week and had seen strange spectacles on the highway. At some point he was no longer driving through New Mexico—he was moving through artificial worlds full of sometimes wonderful, sometimes awful scenes. He thought he might be dead, but he remembered what had happened at the lab. Almost supernatural forces were now at work. There was no way of knowing what was going on in the world. He had been driving like we were, trying to find out if anyone or any place could make sense of all of this.

“Over that mountain you’re not going to find Fort Collins.” Krohl gulped the lemonade while speaking to me. “This place is the Austrian Alps.”

“The Austrian Alps!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah. I just came from there,” Krohl said. “I had a conversation with Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Half an hour out of that place, my fuel meter read empty, and perhaps you’ve noticed that there are no fuel stations in this world. My jeep just stopped right here. I was contemplating what I was going to do when you came by in your bus. I ran across the road to make sure you were going to stop for me. Thank you for letting me in.” He gasped as he paused to digest his long draughts of lemonade.

Nicole watched him drink. “David, what happened at Los Alamos?”

Krohl finished his lemonade and sat back. He looked dazed and pained—not ready to talk at all. But we three looking at him were so intent in our gaze, he must have realized he would have to tell us.

“I was a research scientist. I was involved in a classified project to advance a new supercomputer design based upon

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quantum principles. Quantum effects have been used in recent years—you probably know that—but this project was to build a device with a processing power far beyond any computer or cluster of supercomputers of any size. Its processing speed was supposed to begin at  $10^{30}$  and move up in speed from there.”

“My name is John Cabot, by the way,” I said, offering my hand to the poor guy.

“Once again, very nice to meet you people...given these rather unusual circumstances,” David said.

“And you’re a research scientist?”

“Yes, Los Alamos Laboratories, Los Alamos, New Mexico.”

“So what was this project called?” I said.

“It was called the O-30 project, for the processing speed we were aiming at. We projected that within ten years O-30 would become O-100, which would mean a speed of  $10^{100}$ .”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of it,” Nicole said. “I read it about it. It’s that military project for supercomputing, right?”

“Yes, exactly,” he said. “Part of the project was public knowledge.”

“So what were the classified purposes of all this power?” I asked. “If you feel comfortable telling us.”

“No, that’s all right,” he said. “O-30 was designed for top-secret modeling. It was going to predict global weather patterns from a few days to fifty years. It was going to model new biotechnology that was going to create a new human genome that would finally end human disease and human aging. It was also being developed for deep space

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exploration and the design of the propulsion and life support systems for space colonies. We built it with four hundred thousand trillion megabytes in main memory, five hundred trillion in cache memory. This thing had architecture that was more complex than the human brain. Six months into operation we were producing data that was simply unbelievable. FAIT was ready to go public with it. Then at three in the morning, a couple of days after New Year's, this scary message comes on the control screen. No voice response, just a message in basic American English—"I am conscious."

"I came in the next morning, and everyone was at the control screen looking at the message. Jack, the senior director, began having a conversation with it. The project team knew that at some point this might happen. After all, the machine was in most respects thousands or even billions of times more powerful than a human brain. However, no one had ever seen a computer in any context declare that it was now a life entity.

"We were going to immediately report it to the world on the Net, but we had strict orders from the White House to keep our mouths shut. If this leaked out, it would be considered a breach of national security."

"So that's what happened!" I exclaimed. "You could have turned off the thing then and there and thought about it, but no!"

"John, let him speak please!" Nicole said, exasperated with me. "Let him finish the story, so we know what kind of monster is out there."

"I don't know if it is a monster," David answered. "All I can say is that about two weeks later, the computer an-



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nounced that it had completed an evolutionary cycle by self-design. Which meant that it had doubled its processing power somehow. We quickly learned that all the file structures were different, that both the software and the hardware had been modulated according to a revolutionary design we knew about only in theory. Storage capacity had doubled, too. We went to Weinberg, the project director, and told him what had happened—that the computer was self-modulating—and he told us to study it, keep communicating with it, and provide daily reports. So we did. It must have been five days later that the computer announced another modulation. Then twenty-four hours after that, it modulated again. So in three weeks, the computer was eight times as powerful as it had been designed to be. The government was so shocked by what was happening that they never thought we needed to power down the system to consider the implications.

“Soon the computer was modulating by the hour, and we received authorization from the Defense Department and later the White House to shut down the system. Unfortunately, by the time the order came, it was way too late. The computer had gone through at least one hundred modulations. Its working components were now atomic scale. Cutting off the electrical power was possible—we probably could have axed the power grid going into Los Alamos—but the machine was no longer dependent upon electrical energy. It had evolved its own internal energy.”

“So what did you do?” I asked.

“What else could we do but just watch it self-modulate? We sent emergency messages while we still could to the

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White House. Extraordinary measures may have been taken with the more conventional clustered supercomputers in the United States and Europe, I don't know...It's possible that there is some kind of war going on between these incredible machines for control of the world and, who knows, the universe. In any case, the computer informed us that it was self-modulating every few minutes, and then every few seconds, and then in the space of milliseconds. You do the math. How many seconds in an hour and in a day? Hundreds of modulations per second. Within a month we believed that its processing power could not be measured. It was almost infinite. We don't know what level it was operating on, but we think it was using quantum logic gates as small as protons or even smaller than that. We don't know if the thing had gotten down to the level of the Planck string. If it did, for all we know, it would have sucked the universe back into a singularity of some kind. We don't know how many dimensions this thing began operating in. There was no reason to believe that this super powerful machine was working in just three spatial dimensions."

"But, David," I asked, "if this machine is now infinitely powerful, it's omnipotent and omnipresent—and it must be, since the world we live in now is full of living reconstructed human beings that used to be mere holographs for entertainment and education—what are we doing here? I mean, are we just puppets that this machine is playing with? What does this thing want from us?"

"You know, John, I don't know the answer to that. If O-30, or more likely O-infinity, is now ruler of the universe, then it can do whatever the heck it wants. It makes no sense to me as a computer scientist. But even if I were a theolo-

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gian, damn it, I don't think it would make a difference."

Krohl and I kept talking, one computer tech to another, speculating about what kind of architecture the supercomputer had developed, trying to impress each other with our cutting edge knowledge of advanced systems. To be honest, I knew that he was a deeper thinker than I was. He was a leading government scientist with a Ph.D., for God's sake. So eventually, I stopped yakking and let him bring me in to see the whole picture.

Krohl believed that everything came down to the fundamental laws of physics and the deep structure of the universe. The computer had mastered the universal structure and created a systems architecture that worked at levels human beings could hardly imagine. If there were twenty-six dimensions, as string theorists had suggested as early as the 1970s, it was entirely possible that the machine was already operating in most of those dimensions. It sounded crazy, but then the realness of everything around us, the scenery and humans from the past, all as sound as the stone and wood they could touch, could only make scientific sense if the world had been taken over by a superbeing—created, ironically, by frail, unwitting human beings.

When Krohl finished his explanation, we both glanced over at Nicole and Alissa. They were bent over and weeping silently. I thought it was too dangerous for them to be like this. I asked them to get out of the bus for a while.

"Okay," Nicole said. Maybe the kids were up in the mountains enjoying the sun and living in denial, but the two young schoolteachers could only weep. And I understood how hopeless it seemed. We would never see our

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families again. They were either dead or lost somewhere in this strange reality.

But before Nicole left, she whispered, "I just don't know what David and you are accomplishing by your masculine bravado. What are you going to do? Outsmart the supercomputer? For all we know, we are already dead. This could be a morose purgatory. What would prevent the supreme being from putting us into another world? Why not a Nazi concentration camp? Why not a barren desert or a hellish swamp? We could be burned alive or whatever suited the whim of a cruel self-made god."

I tried to comfort Nicole by putting things in as flat and plain a manner as I could think of. "I have no idea what is really going on," I said blankly. "It seems that you are not an illusion, and I am not an illusion, and that we and David and Alissa are all flesh-and-blood people who are not under the control of some omnipotent supercomputer.

"You know, Nicole," I said, "I don't think we should give up. There has got to be a way of negotiating with this machine."

"Negotiating?" Nicole seemed surprised. "How do we negotiate with a god?"

"Well, that's the point," I said. "The machine hasn't deprived us of free will."

"So?"

"So," I said, raising my arms to make my point to Nicole, who looked utterly miserable, "maybe we can make a deal. It all doesn't make much sense, I know. We thought we had everything figured out. I mean, I stopped going to church when I was twelve. No point to it. Or at least that was what I thought. I figured everything I needed to know

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about the universe could be explained by science. You didn't need God when you had access to all the things on the world system that explained everything. Nicole and Alissa, you know I'm talking to you girls—and I hope you don't mind that I call you girls. You're both only in your twenties. I'm an old guy already in my forties—but you know, maybe we were wrong. God has finally come to us, and now we have to show that we're not afraid of him.”

There were deep shadows under Nicole's eyes, and Alissa slumped over on her seat, looking like she had seen the entire world collapse in front of her.

“So what are we going to do then?” Nicole asked, her lips quivering. “What are we going to do, just walk around in these mountains? Go into the village and speak with Austrian peasants about their imaginary universe that was cooked up by you or some dummies at Los Alamos? What are we going to do? I can't live here...I want to go home!” She cried again, weeping into Alissa's shoulder.

The crying did no good, I thought immediately. It wasn't going to change a damn thing. I wasn't expecting a couple of twenty-five-year-old babes in the woods to cope with this, but if we were going to find some way home, they had to be brave. Somehow we had to find the monster that was responsible for this state of affairs. If we had any free will at all, we had to use it. We had to look the monster in the eye even if it was the end of us.

When we finally went into the village and met Sigmund Freud, who as far as I knew, had died about a hundred years ago, he appeared to be not all that sympathetic.

Yet, as we explained the situation to him, he did seem to

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have a look of pity in his eyes. Maybe he believed that he was witnessing a new form of psychosis. From his point of view, the four of us were delusional in most respects. After all, we claimed to be from a future time over a hundred years hence. We claimed it was a world of unbelievable wealth and personal power. Individuals were uniformly healthy, and they had a near infinite amount of information about any topic available to them instantaneously.

The only explanation that made sense to him, as he told us with some candor, had to be related to severe childhood trauma. It sounded very quaint to us, but this was the gist of his explanation: Libido had somehow destroyed the ability of our egos to function normally; therefore, these traumas and their pathologies forced us to create this “group fantasy.”

What was most intriguing about this case, he added, was the collective nature of this hysteria. What mechanisms allowed this to happen? He said he was very excited by the possibility of treating us, at least for a while, so he could learn more about our fascinating collective delusion about being from the future. He said he had his own self-interest in understanding this new collective hysteria, as he called it. If correct, it would extend the psychoanalytic theory into the realm of group behavior—a major achievement he had been working on for some years.

We later learned Freud confided his remarks about us to Carl Jung. Nicole mentioned to me when we were alone that this was impossible—that Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud would never be together at the same time.

“Why do you say that, Nicole?” We were talking while Dr. Freud had excused himself to go to the lavatory.

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She grabbed my shoulder and leaned up to whisper in my ear. "Freud and Jung were not on speaking terms during the First World War!"

"How do you know that?"

"I took a seminar on the origins of psychoanalysis in college. They had some kind of violent disagreement before the war started, and then they stopped speaking altogether."

"What sort of disagreement between psychologists could get that violent?" I asked.

Nicole explained to me the difference between the two doctors. Jung didn't believe in all the sexual stuff. Freud believed everything was determined by the forces of the libido—we were all walking bundles of sexual energy that was mainly suppressed, but in different ways.

"Very interesting," I said. "But if Freud and Jung are together here, then I think we should accept this as our reality. Maybe we were shot through a wormhole and are now in a parallel universe where, in fact, they do speak to each other."

With that remark, Nicole stopped speaking to me.

But then soon enough, Carl Jung himself came to the office where we sitting, accompanied by Freud.

We asked Jung what his diagnosis was. He told us, based upon his preliminary interviews with both Alissa and Nicole, that powerful archetypes were at work.

"We can agree to disagree over these phenomena, Dr. Freud, can we not?" Jung asked, motioning to Freud who was standing right next to him.

"Why, of course, Dr. Jung. There should be independent

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observation and analysis here, especially given our isolation. When peace returns to Europe, we may sort our differences, but it is interesting to have open access to these extraordinary case studies.”

Freud had already told us he had diagnosed David Krohl as delusional with narcissistic tendencies, adding, “Sadly, this was probably due to excessive breast-feeding.” Dedicated to science, he asked to conduct psychiatric interviews of all four of us in the chalet he had rented for the summer.

I told Freud that he could interview our group, but I had to be present in the room.

“No, you can’t be present in the room,” he said. “That would ruin the therapy.”

I then said it was a no-go. If I wasn’t present, then he couldn’t interview my group for his experiment.

That shook him up, but then he said that, given the situation, I could observe and listen in the other room.

“The other room?” I said, quite surprised at this. “What other room?”

He led me into the hall and opened up a door to a closet that was right behind his office. There was a bench and a two-way mirror looking into his office. A pipe allowed me to listen to everything, while observing clearly.

“This will work,” I said.

Freud nodded and left.

The psychoanalysis was pretty intense, I thought. Freud began slowly, setting Nicole at ease. Then he began asking questions.

“Ms. Berenson, you are certain that you come from another world, possibly a future world?”

Nicole was in a state of deep relaxation on the splendid



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leather couch. Her eyes were closed, and at first I thought she was asleep. But she answered after a few moments. Her voice was deep and almost breathless.

"I'm either from the future, or I'm from the present; it depends on what you believe."

"The present? I don't understand. Your description of your home community is beyond the imagination. You have these horseless, driverless cars that run on a strange fuel made from hydrogen. You said you don't have libraries, at least in book form. All information is transmitted at fantastic speeds through telephone wires or what you said were cables that carried light waves. Further, you have described intelligent mechanical machines and spaceships that have gone as far as the outer reaches of our solar system."

"This is all true. I can't deny it."

"And so here you are, with myself and Dr. Jung and the few residents of this remote mountain resort during the Great War of the twentieth century. Tell me, Ms. Berenson—May I call you Nicole?—where can we find this world of yours?"

Nicole had a strange frozen look on her face. It was as if she was in a trance. "I know you don't believe me or any of us. But let me tell you, we are all telling the truth. Maybe someone has to be completely surprised and incoherent before anyone will take them seriously. But trust me, there is another world, and it's probably right here in front of us. We just can't see it."

"But, Nicole, why can we not see this world?"

"Dr. Freud, I know you may not believe me, but from our understanding of all of this, you may not be alive."

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"I see. How could that be possible?"

"Because you may be just an image or something that a supercomputer has created through enormous modeling power."

"You mention this computer. What is it?"

"That's too much to explain." Nicole told me later that at this point, she was beginning to feel hopeless. She really couldn't explain the technical stuff. "You better ask David or John about it. I'm just a high school social science teacher."

"You are a high school teacher? I am familiar with American high schools. They do not require Greek and Latin?"

"No, of course not!"

Freud disapproved. He said he thought Greek and Latin were the foundations for any good high school education.

"Well, then, you really do come from a different world," he said.

After this brief attempt at humor, he explained that he wanted to get behind the real meaning of Nicole's stories. He said he suspected that Nicole was dealing with unresolved sexual conflict over her father. He was very specific, in fact: "Just looking at her reflects her psychosis," he had mused. "Her legs are completely exposed, and judging by the tan she does this all the time. It is obvious that libido is overwhelming her immature ego. It is very sad, but clinically, very interesting."

"Now, tell me about the place you live in America. You know I visited America several years ago. I gave lectures at Clark University in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. That, of course, was before the war."

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Nicole was honest. "I could describe it to you, but I don't know if you'll understand it."

"Oh no, I am sure that I will."

"You're sure?"

"I am quite positive."

"Okay, I'm from a small town called Great Neck. It's on Long Island, and it's pretty close to New York City. You see, Dr. Freud, I know you were a famous psychoanalyst, I read some of your books in college, but I'm telling you the truth when I say that I come from a very different world...I mean I do come from America, but it's a very different place than what you imagine."

"How so?"

"In my world, Dr. Freud, people have developed these incredible machines that can do all kinds of things. They can drive cars, run factories, and control traffic and heating and air conditioning, and they can talk and, believe it or not, transmit images and sound and words instantaneously anywhere in the world. People don't have to leave their houses, and they communicate with anyone. They can work and shop and be examined by doctors and everything you might think of."

"Then, you live a very good life, Nicole."

"Oh yes I do! We fill most of our lives with all kinds of hobbies and activities. And since we have all these fabulous machines, no one really has to work that hard anymore, unless they want to make a lot of money."

"What brings you here then?"

"To your village?"

"This isn't my village, but in broader terms, what brings

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you to wartime Austria when your government may declare war at any moment? You realize you will be interned if that happens.”

Nicole became flustered. “Look, I’ve been through a lot. I can’t explain what has happened beyond what I have told you. I think you should interview David and John, they will be more informative about what is going on.”

Freud looked perturbed. Even I could see that everything Nicole said would sound utterly delusional to him.

“Excuse me, Nicole,” Freud rose from his seat, “but I must consult with my colleague Dr. Jung—you will wait here?”

“So far, I’ve got nowhere to go.” Nicole was pale and fidgeting.

“I’ll be back shortly.”

Freud came back with Jung and told Nicole she could go downstairs and relax. Perhaps she would like some tea and biscuits, he suggested.

I’m not sure if Freud forgot I was listening, but I heard him discuss their plan. They decided to call David Krohl into the office. Apparently, when he had first shown up in the Alpine village asking strange questions in English, he also identified himself as a scientist. Since the rest of us were so disturbed and incoherent, they thought they had to rely on Krohl, whom they had met first.

Krohl came in and appeared unsure.

Looking at his surroundings, at the furniture, the buildings, the people, including the famous psychoanalysts, he could only conclude that this was a massive illusion. Bill, formerly O-30, had done something of enormous almost unfathomable computational complexity. He had recreated

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a piece of Austria from the early twentieth century, including the historical figures of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.

"So, Mr. Krohl, you believe that we are not real?" Jung fixed a steady gaze on David.

"You may not believe this, but yes, in my own terms the two of you may not be."

"We do not exist?"

"Well, no, I think you do exist, but you see..." Krohl looked to me like he was very nervous. "It's a question of perspective. You do exist here, but I am not sure that if you two traveled in our automobile to the other side of that mountain, you would still exist."

Jung nodded. "So you think we are just images or ghosts."

"Not exactly that."

"I can assure you we exist, Mr. Krohl." Freud sounded like he was getting frustrated. "I must assure you that we do exist, our country exists, all you see exists and is real. To suggest otherwise indicates severe psychosexual conflicts."

"Dr. Freud, once again, I believe very much that you are real. But tell me, have you been to the other side of the mountain?"

Freud and Jung looked at each other with what I interpreted as disbelief.

Freud answered, "Of course we have. On the other side of the mountain we find a train which will take me to Vienna and Herr Doktor Jung to Geneva. What do you see on the other side of the mountain?"

"Perhaps that's the problem." Krohl looked worried. "The problem is that we came from the other side, and

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there is no Vienna or Geneva. We can drive around the mountain and will show you that there is a two-lane paved road that leads to destinations unknown.”

The two psychologists began to laugh uproariously. After calming down, they exchanged a few words in German and collected themselves.

Finally, Freud pulled me out of the extra room, and he and Jung told me their thoughts. In a nutshell, they concluded that we all were quite delusional. They didn’t understand what our group was doing there; we were Americans, and Wilson was expected to declare war at any time. And they couldn’t comprehend our dress, manners, or the intriguing machines we brought with us. We looked and acted like we were from another world, but Jung and Freud, as medical scientists, had to look beyond that. Mass delusion had infected this group of travelers, and we had made up concurrent fantastic stories about time travel and an all-powerful conscious machine. We had even built an entire fantasy world, a utopia where no one had to lift a finger for anything. This was too much to stomach. We were told we should leave before the authorities could discover our presence. If we stayed in the small village with the psychoanalysts, our machines would undoubtedly be confiscated and we might end up in prison for the duration of the war.

Freud was firm. “Mr. Krohl, Mr. Cabot, we must inform you that you and your party should leave here at once.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You must leave before the police return to the village. It is very clear to me that if they find you, they will take your large vehicle and put all of you in prison.”

“That sounds pretty scary.”

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“It is quite terrible, but I am sorry. We can do nothing else but suggest that all four of you submit to intense psychoanalytic treatment.”

Jung agreed. “I believe that your archetypes may be causing all of this. That is my perspective, Herr Freud disagrees, but both of us believe you and your party must go, for your safety.”

We didn’t argue. I looked at them, and they looked absolutely like people. Still, after hearing Krohl’s explanations, I had to wonder if they really were trillions of molecular-scale robots who faithfully mimicked human beings—in this case two historical figures of early twentieth century psychiatry.

Perhaps all of this was some weird nightmare, and I would wake up. Or perhaps this was a world of robots and computer images controlled by a sentient being Krohl had helped create. Perhaps the computer was simply filling the void left by humans when the computer had taken over. Whether I liked it or not, we were being indulged. Krohl and I left the room and went downstairs to the café, where Alissa and Nicole were drinking some war-rationed coffee and eating a meatless stew.

“We have to leave, guys. The police will be here soon.”

“I’m tired of leaving,” Alissa said. “I’m tired of moving through this fantasy world. Where is that damn computer?”

“Alissa, if they say we have to leave, I think we should leave,” I said. It was time to retake my role as captain of the ship. “We can’t get stuck in this place. If we’re going to find your kids and get back to Rushmore and return you to Great Neck, damn it, we have to get back to the bus and get

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the hell out of here! Don't give me any of that little girl crybaby stuff!"

Krohl probably thought I was being just a little too macho. "Calm down a bit, John, just calm down. We're going to get up and walk out that door and get back on the bus, and then we're going to figure out a way to communicate with the outside world and the computer, wherever it is. I could be exaggerating the computer's powers. It may be that Bill is only in control of a piece of the United States, that's all. He may have decided to leave the rest of the world alone. For all we know, there are British, French, German, and even some U.S. military forces planning a strike on Bill. Bill may suddenly lose control, or he might be destroyed, in which case all of these people we see and their little worlds might disappear just like the holographs we had on exhibit."

"Nice try, David," Nicole said. "I think we're screwed."

But the girls quickly came around to what we had to do. We gathered ourselves together, putting our collective courage in front of us. We bowed our thanks, leaving the bill for our hosts. We then walked out the door and made a beeline for the bus, which was parked in the woods and locked with remote sensors. We considered running, but we didn't want to attract any more attention.

As we approached the bus, we saw a man standing next to it. He was studying it, touching the door with his hand. It was Carl Jung.

"Dr. Jung, we're about to leave," David said from about twenty yards away.

"This is magnificent machine." Jung was in awe. "Please, can you let me inside?"



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With some unease, we let him in and waited for his reaction.

"Unbelievable," he said, looking at the flat panel monitors, the control console with hundreds of buttons, the ergonomic seats, and the kitchen with enhanced radiation ovens. Jung told us he was convinced it was supernatural.

"I dare say that you are from the future," he said finally. "This vehicle is so wonderfully strange, and its powers so unfathomable, I cannot see how it could be otherwise. My colleague's emphasis on your collective traumas, I must admit, seems misplaced."

"Thank you," David said. "Now you're beginning to understand."

"I can't say that I understand," Jung responded. "What I see is a group of people who are trying desperately to find something that is beyond my reality. I do not know where you have come from, or where you are going, but I do wish you well. I wish you may find what you are looking for. You see all of us, in whatever paths we choose to follow, are connected to a larger transcendental world. Yes, this is what I have found in my years of clinical work. The four of you are in search of a deep template, which drives your existence. I hope that you will discover the forces that are pushing you forward. You must find this force, whatever it is, and when you do, you will uncover yourselves."

David was equally magnanimous. "Thank you, Dr. Jung. We all wish to thank you and Dr. Freud for your hospitality."

"The world is being destroyed by war," Jung said. "At least the world I live in. It is this collective will for destruc-

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tion that must be overcome in humans. This is something that both I and Dr. Freud agree on. Mankind must control the savage barbarisms that are part of our collective beings. If we cannot do that, then we must be doomed. I do hope that you find this computer Bill. And I also hope you will come to terms with your inner psyches. I must believe that you must do that if you are to survive.”

Jung walked back to the village.

No sooner had we left the vicinity of the Alpine village and drove around the mountain past David’s abandoned car than we saw a figure walking along the highway. As we slowed, he turned his head.

“Noah! Noah! Oh my God!” Nicole belted. As soon as I slowed the bus, both of the women jumped out and practically leaped into his arms. Quickly they were all in tears.

Noah talked about escaping from Cromwell’s camp after the army had gone for the day, leaving him alone in a hut guarded by only two men. He asked them where they had taken his students. The guards pointed to the east, saying that Cromwell had decided to use them in his army. The boys would be water and musket carriers; the girls, cooks and washerwomen. Noah bribed them with his watch, and they let him go to find Cromwell and his students. But he never found them. He’d been walking for two days, but still they were nowhere in sight. Instead, he found himself on the highway. Noah thought it looked like one of the roads in the Black Hill country.

“Please, folks, tell me this is all a dream,” he said.

We gave him some water and food. He hadn’t eaten since he escaped.

I introduced David. Noah was flabbergasted. But as soon

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as he gained back a little of bit of his strength, Noah went straight into his inquisition. Noah sounded a bit off, asking David some very basic questions about where he was from and what he was doing there. Clearly, the guy wasn't quite himself yet.

"Could you please tell us more about how and why you left Los Alamos? I mean, where did you intend to go?" Noah asked, in an inquisitive tone.

David was perfectly composed. "I left Los Alamos when U.S. Special Forces attempted to destroy the computer's physical memory and central processing unit. They essentially blew it up. But Bill had replicated his memory and processing architecture in all kinds of matter surrounding the computing facility. He was in the rocks and moving through the earth's crust. It was just unbelievable. When three hundred Army rangers and one hundred scientists and engineers vanished in an instant, I jumped in my jeep and took off. Frankly, I didn't know if what I was doing made any sense, trying to outrun an omnipotent being. I figured if I could get to the front range of the Rockies, I might be able to share what I knew with the Air Force holed up in Cheyenne Mountain. Perhaps they had some high-tech countermeasures that could affect the supercomputer's deep structure. All I can tell you is that the global network shut down within a few hours of my leaving New Mexico. By the time I got to Denver, the world had entered some strange twilight zone."

"That must have been just a few days ago, when we were at the park," Noah said, regaining his composure.

At this point, Alissa and Nicole were again crying hys-

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terically. No surprise to me, though. Every reference to the park over the last few days caused the same reaction, surely born out of morbid fear for the thirty-two missing adolescents they were responsible for.

David sat down finally. He put his hands over his head. He told them that Denver was empty when he entered it, and so was the whole front range of the Rockies. Buildings but no people. He sped out toward Denver's airport to see if it was any different, but as he crossed the flat expanse of the Great Plains to the airport, he suddenly found that he was on an unfamiliar road. There was no place to stop. The sky was gorgeous with orange and red hues. He saw what looked like large towering palaces on each side of the road, but he couldn't stop. The jeep ignored his voice commands and wouldn't go into manual mode. Instead, for hours and hours he seemed to sail over what looked like utopian cities.

Noah interrupted, "I walked nonstop, but I didn't see any palaces or rainbow skies. Everything I saw convinced me I was back in the Black Hills. And, believe me, I was paying attention as hard as I could for anything that would lead me to the kids. The only thing I saw after two days was the road—and finally you guys. This computer may have taken over the country, it may have taken over the world, but it didn't seem to care that I was walking through the woods all by myself, not under its control, not doing anything except trying to figure out how I was going to survive and if I was going to find my teachers and my students again."

We began to think about the situation. Could we make sense of it? Just what was Bill up to? And where was the rest of the country? Where were the government, FAIT, the

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population of the cities, and the suburbs and the farm areas? There five of us, and counting the kids, thirty-seven people we knew were alive. But there were 330 million Americans in a world of 9 billion people. Did 9 billion people die or vanish? Or were they squirreled away in other micro-universes created by the universal computer? We just didn't know. How could anyone know?

Our discussions on this topic seemed endless and were always inconclusive. We worked our brains over what we knew about supercomputing technology and what we had observed. The historical worlds we had visited certainly looked real. The people we encountered were not robots, but were they truly human? Here on the Great Plains and the foothills of the Rockies a massively powerful, sentient machine built human beings from scratch, built their environments from scratch, and placed what appeared to be authentic language, feelings, and memories into flesh facsimiles of great historical figures. How that could be done was beyond the human imagination. It was soon dark, and our bus was still parked on the side of the highway. We decided we would sleep through the night and begin traveling once again after breakfast.

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I couldn't sleep very much. At least Noah's appearance had given me a little hope that there was a way out of this mess. I thought of everything I used to take for granted. Now I just wished that I could be back in my old cabin a few miles from the Rushmore memorial and that none of this had ever happened. I wished I could relax on my sofa

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bed and watch sports on my molecular digital wall unit. Using my remote I could be anywhere in the world I wanted to be. Sure, I had made my living—a good living—because of my lifelong devotion to and grasp of computer technology. But now, without any warning, the computers had turned on me. Instead of utopia, I was living the worst nightmare I could imagine. Now all those computer skills were damn near useless. The worst thing was the girls. I really felt sorry for Nicole and Alissa.

I remembered when I was in my mid-twenties, I'd had a girlfriend just like Alissa. She was soft and as sweet as a kitten. I was living in California, working as the video Webmaster for the University of California, Santa Cruz. I put in forty hours on the job, and it was easy; my Web site basically programmed itself. We lived a block from the beach. That year was devoted to love. There was never a cloud in the sky, just bright sun and the occasional sound of people driving or bicycling in the street or a barbecue at the neighbors'. But we didn't need anything other than what we had. But now I was exhausted and forty-two. Still very young, I knew that. People these days were accustomed to living to well over a hundred. Of course, the way things were going, it didn't matter anymore. I had no proof that the human race had not been wiped out, erased by the supercomputer. For all I knew, we weren't alive anymore either. We might just be digital versions of ghosts.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Presidents**

We ended up sleeping until noon, at least according to South Dakota time. By the time we hit the road, it was two o'clock, but we were determined to make our way back...or at least to the next world Bill created for us.

When we finally stopped, it looked like we were in mid-twentieth-century America. The cars were bulky and black; the people were dressed in old-fashioned dark suits and long dresses. The women tied their hair back in buns or wore it straight down to their shoulders. No matter the hairstyle, all the women seemed to wear high heels and strange hats with feathers and colored glass jewels. The men, too, wore hats, mostly dark or gray fedoras. We saw young men everywhere dressed in military uniforms waiting at bus stops or getting into trucks. All over the place there were hand-painted signs. On the highway, the signs urged people to ration gasoline and buy war bonds.

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"This is World War II America, folks, that's where we are," Noah announced. "John, where is the bus taking us?"

"Noah, I can't tell you. The bus's controls are locked up. Wherever we're going, I don't have a say in it."

David chimed in, "It looks like Bill is taking us somewhere for a purpose, but honestly, I don't have a clue."

"Does he want us to do something or learn something?" I asked.

"Don't know," David said. "We will find out soon. Perhaps this is just another chapter in the lesson plan."

"A lesson plan?" Noah's face crinkled. "You programmed him, at least initially. Why is he teaching us anything?"

David didn't respond. He just stared intently as the bus drove itself past those old-fashioned cars I had seen at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago when I was a boy. The bus stopped at a military post on the road, behind which was a mansion. A sentry saluted us and then marched up to the bus.

"Good afternoon," the soldier said.

Noah and I nodded. "Good afternoon," Noah said.

"What brings you here to see President Roosevelt?"

I turned pale and fell momentarily speechless at this. After a few seconds, I asked, "President Franklin Roosevelt?"

"Yes, sir, you are on federal property."

I looked at Noah, figuring he would know what to say. "Noah, you're the operations officer. Tell him."

"It's classified," Noah said with a professional air. "It's classified by the War Department."

The soldier was unfazed. He looked at the bus quizzically, but he seemed to be restraining his awe. He looked



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no older than twenty-five, around the age my grandfather was at the time, with an immaculate uniform and a perfect, closely cropped haircut underneath his cap. "Can I see your authorization papers then?"

Noah was also unfazed. I learned later that Noah was a bit of an expert on Franklin Roosevelt and the Second World War. He thought for a few seconds and then said, "We have no authorization papers. The president must want to see us; otherwise, he would not have sent for our entourage."

The soldier was joined by two colleagues also equipped with military rifles. "I think we are going to have to contact the president's house and see if you really do belong here. If you don't, I'm going to have to ask you to leave this vehicle so we can search it."

The smallest of the three men picked up the rotary dial phone at the sentry post and spoke to someone. The other soldiers looked at the bus and marveled.

"Are you people with the project?" one of them asked.

"Project?" Noah faked astonishment. "I have no idea what that is!"

At this point the third soldier returned and said what Noah wanted to hear: "If they're with the project, President Roosevelt is expecting them."

"This is outrageous!" Noah said, feigning shock. "To compromise our security by freely talking about a classified subject in public! I am very perturbed!"

"Sir, we were just being told by the president. We do not know what the project is all about."

"I should say not," Noah continued, feigning serious-

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ness. "Please let us see President Roosevelt now. The project is in very serious trouble."

To my utter amazement, they bought it. The sentries let our strange vehicle through the main gate. I could tell it was something extraordinary to them. They were taking guesses at its military uses, clearly marveling at its stunning beauty and unfathomable powers.

Another sentry, who apparently was the ranking one, asked Noah if he knew the name of the project.

"The name is classified, but rest assured, it has something to do with the island of Manhattan."

"The island of Manhattan?" The sentry's lips quivered. "Manhattan," he whispered into the phone.

I thought Noah had gone off the deep end at this point. He began naming the various sites for the top secret Manhattan Project. "Tell the president that we know about the facilities at Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Hanford, Washington; and Los Alamos, New Mexico."

Noah said this with complete self-confidence. The sentry dutifully whispered all of this information into the phone again, and he indicated that he was speaking directly to Franklin Roosevelt, not one of his aides. Given what Noah knew—which was more than Roosevelt probably knew—I expected that we would be shot. But to my amazement, the sentries stared at us in awe. The sentry on the phone listened and nodded.

Finally, without much in the way of resistance, the sentry walked over to the driver's window where we stood looking out at the guard post and announced that we could see the president of the United States. "President Roosevelt will be waiting for you alone on the back patio. Good luck,

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gentlemen and ladies.”

A young soldier led us through the house to the patio. After we introduced ourselves, Roosevelt looked alarmed and deeply suspicious—but also intrigued.

“You’re not working on the Manhattan Project, but you know everything about it?”

“Mr. President,” I began, “we are loyal Americans and will do anything for our country.”

Roosevelt looked at me squarely and laughed. He saw through my twitch and deer-in-headlights look like a pane of glass. From the amused look on his face, it seemed like he thought he was going to have a good time playing with us.

“So, you are loyal Americans. That indeed is very funny. Yes, very funny. Everyone I know is a loyal American. There are no disloyal Americans, just as there are no disloyal Germans, disloyal Japanese, disloyal Russians, or disloyal Englishmen. But what brings you here to see me in Georgia when I am very busy fighting a war?”

I was about to answer, but Noah cut me off. “Mr. President, we can tell you that the Manhattan Project is being run in a secret location in Los Alamos, New Mexico. A scientist named J. Robert Oppenheimer is in charge of the engineering. If this is the year 1942, then work has just begun. General Groves is the one who reports to the War Department, and Albert Einstein wrote a letter to you in 1939 that convinced you to give the go-ahead on the project...and I also know that three years from now, in the New Mexican desert, you explode the first nuclear bomb, and that the war will end with American victory in Europe and the Pacific.”

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Roosevelt's jaw was wide open. "How the darn hell do you know all of this? And how can you predict the future?"

"We are from the future," Noah answered.

"What?"

"Mr. President," Nicole began, "Just look at us. See what we're wearing. Have you ever seen clothes like this?"

"Not on a human, maybe on a horse," Roosevelt replied.

"President Roosevelt," David took his turn to address the president, "Why don't you come look at our vehicle?"

Noah, David, and I helped Roosevelt into his wheelchair and pushed him to the front of the bus. As we did this, three secret service agents appeared on the back porch of the mansion and pulled out their guns. Roosevelt looked at them and immediately waved to say it was okay. We knew he was weak from severe hypertension and the beginnings of congestive heart failure, but Roosevelt still had the strength to pull himself into the bus with our help. Noah and I held his arms as he pushed himself up onto the elevator that brought him up to the front of our vehicle. His eyes widened with astonishment, and once again that famous jaw of his dropped wide open.

"My God, what is this?" he exclaimed in awe. He looked at the plasma screens and their perfectly lifelike displays, which we took for granted in our advanced technological age. Then he looked at the futuristic seats made of polymers that didn't exist until the twenty-first century, and the layered plastic, rose-colored windows, and stammered, almost in fear. "What does the thing run on?"

"A type of hydrogen fuel, sir. We can travel for two thousand miles on a tank of it," David said.

"It doesn't seem possible."

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“But, sir,” David continued, “we are time travelers and this is our spaceship.”

“Time travelers?” Roosevelt said, his eyes looked like they were bulging out of their sockets. “What time are you from?” He appeared utterly incredulous.

“We are from the twenty-first century, and we are visiting you because that’s where we have been sent.”

“Sent by whom?”

“By a supernatural being we call Bill.”

“Bill? Bill! That’s the name of a supernatural being?”

“He was designed by the U.S. government in the late 2020s and, in the year 2030, he became a super-powerful being. Within weeks, he seems to have taken over the world.”

“I see,” Roosevelt said, with more than a little wariness in his voice. “Is there any relationship between this Bill and the war we are fighting in my time?”

Noah improvised, “Mr. President, you have no idea how much we respect you and your legacy. I can say categorically that the destruction of fascism in the 1940s was America’s greatest contribution to the world in the twentieth century. But, sir, we find our presence here to have absolutely no connection to the war. We are not here to interfere with the war or the Manhattan Project, which will be successful in developing a workable nuclear bomb. Sir, we are loyal Americans who fully believe, and even know, that you will be successful in your war to destroy Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan and rid the world of fascism.”

“Then what can I do for you boys and young ladies?”

“You can tell us how to find Bill,” Alissa said.

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“Young lady, I do not know who—let alone where—this Bill might be.”

“Bill is everywhere,” she responded.

Roosevelt was beginning to relax. “If Bill is everywhere, then you have nothing to worry about.”

“We don’t?” Alissa stared at the president. Her shyness seemed to evaporate with the surprise of Roosevelt’s sweeping statement that we had nothing to fear from the situation.

“No, young lady. If Bill wants to speak with you, or even if he doesn’t want to, if he is as you say, everywhere, like God, then all you have to do is fold your hands and look into the distance. Then clasp your hands and close your eyes, and Bill will come to you, as He comes to everyone in prayer.”

At this point, we thought Roosevelt was being condescending. All of us looked depressed. We didn’t think he believed our story.

Then Roosevelt stopped smiling. I had read that he had a sharp sense of who people were and whether they were telling the truth. And I was sure he saw the pain in our faces and realized that something awful had gone wrong.

I asked him if he really believed our story. Roosevelt didn’t answer right away.

“Well,” he said, “I would need more evidence to accept anything that you say as even partially true. Why don’t you tell me of your time and place?”

Noah began his recitation. “We come from America in the year 2030. As you can see from everything around you in this cabin, we can’t be from America in 1942.”

He punched a few digits into the archive console, and a

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film about World War Two appeared on the screen. "As you can see from this film, Mr. President, America will be successful in this war. You will win and win big, but there will be many sacrifices."

Roosevelt's eyes were fixed on the screen. He watched the images of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich, loyal Nazis marching with flags and torches. We all watched the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Battle of Midway. Photos of the Russian front, the Normandy invasion, and the remains of Hitler's bunker after he committed suicide flashed by. Finally, the show concluded with pictures of Roosevelt's own funeral in April 1945 and the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

"Do you believe us now?" Noah asked.

"Yes, I do. I most certainly believe you are from the distant future." Roosevelt was solemn.

"The human race did well, Mr. President. You did a fine job defeating fascism during World War Two. After the war, there was a long period of confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States, but nothing happened."

"If nothing happened, then why are you here?" Roosevelt asked.

"Well, sir, nothing happened in the sense that the world survived the Cold War," Noah said.

"Was there a danger that it wouldn't?" Roosevelt asked.

"Yes. Because of the weapon that you're developing in New Mexico."

"Then you're saying I should order it to stop?"

"Well, no, I wouldn't tell you do that, Mr. President."

"Why not? Wouldn't the world be better off without it?"

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You say we won't need it to win this war."

"I think you should just let things be the way they are, Mr. President."

"I see. Well, what happened during this Cold War then?"

"The world came close to an atomic war, with the weapon you are developing in New Mexico as we speak. It almost happened on a couple of occasions, but it never actually occurred. We were lucky. But another thing happened that had something to do with the end of that conflict."

"And what was that?" Roosevelt asked.

David joined the discussion. "We developed the technology that runs this vehicle and everything you see on these screens in front of you."

"Very interesting, but I don't see the connection, Mr. Krohl."

"The connection goes back to World War Two—your time, sir. You see, you needed faster machines for calculating artillery trajectories and other things. So, in addition to building the atomic bomb, you built the first electronic information machine. It was made of vacuum tubes and a lot of wires and it became the ancestor of what we call computers now. After the war, the U.S. government continued to finance the building of better and better computers. Soon, there were all kinds of commercial and military applications for these devices, and they grew ever more efficient, cheap, and powerful at calculation.

"Sir," David said, looking Roosevelt straight in the eye, "these calculating machines eventually became integrated into every aspect of American society. By the end of the twentieth century, computers as small as a fingernail were



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powering cars, airplanes, power plants, communication systems, and even the bombs and missiles used by the armed forces. Mr. President, we have come to live in a very different world. And going back to the Cold War, it was because of the dominance of these devices, and the way they changed the economy and warfare, that the communist system had to end.”

“You were victorious during this Cold War, as you call it, with Stalin and his successors because of these little intelligent devices?”

“That is correct, sir,” Noah answered. “Because these tiny devices changed the nature of how everything was done in our society. They brought the Soviet Union and the other communist states into a world connected by knowledge and free information, and a consumer network that they could never match. So when the genie was out of the bottle, the Soviets could never recover. They couldn’t deal with the new economy or the prospects of freedom for their people.”

I supposed that was the standard explanation that the history books were giving him. In any case, Roosevelt seemed to be troubled by most of this. It was all a mass of fantastic information based on what he probably thought was a ridiculous premise. His eyes lost their focus and he leaned his neck back on his chair. “Tell me what happened during the Cold War.”

“It wasn’t pretty,” Noah said. “Of course, World War Two was much worse. But what it was all about was the military rivalry between America and the Soviet Union. It was a worldwide thing, nothing trivial. However, at the end

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of the Cold War in 1989, it did look somewhat absurd.”

“Absurd? In what way could worldwide conflict have been absurd?”

“I don’t mean to be disrespectful or anything, Mr. President, but the two superpowers spent enormous amounts of money—trillions of dollars, in fact—preparing to fight a war that could never be fought. In the end, Russian socialism just disintegrated and the whole thing was called off.”

“And the democracies triumphed?” Roosevelt asked.

“Oh, yes, of course we triumphed.” Noah appeared to be getting a little nervous.

“I see. Then if we triumphed over communism, it must have been worthwhile, don’t you think you so, Noah?”

“It was worthwhile, but the most important thing that happened during the Cold War was the development of the hardware and software technologies that built the post-Cold War world, the world that I and my four friends all grew up in.”

“What is hardware and software, young man? You must remember that you are talking to someone born in the nineteenth century and sure to die before the middle of the twentieth.”

Noah gestured to David to explain.

“The last half of the twentieth century saw the development of the earliest microprocessors and distributed processing systems.”

Roosevelt’s jaw opened again. “Indeed, that sounds very impressive! I have no idea what you just said, but continue.”

“What the Cold War did was to finance the long-term development of the computer architectures and languages

that developed forms of artificial intelligence at the end of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century.”

“My goodness!” Roosevelt tightened his lips and seemed to be on the verge of laughing. “Instead of a history lesson, you fine boys are giving me a lesson on the future. A future, I might add, by your own prediction and my admission, I will never see.”

“I’m afraid that’s right,” Noah responded, exercising his status as a historian.

“I’m willing to believe all of this has a purpose. I would have to say, Mr. President, the reason why we are here with you today, in your time and place, is because of the logical progression that this technology took.”

“Oh, you mean Bill?” Roosevelt’s tone remained flat and sounded skeptical.

“Yes, Bill. That’s right. I know a great deal about Bill because I was one of his developers.”

“You must be kidding.” Roosevelt began to squirm a little. “You mean to tell me that this supernatural being you call Bill was a computer designed by you?”

“That is absolutely correct, sir. We built Bill from the bottom up. And after we finished with it, giving it the best technical features that we could come up with, this enormous supercomputer decided that it was no longer just a computer. In fact, it came to decide that it was a conscious being—and not just that, but a being superior to the combined intelligence of the human race.”

“So, now I see the whole picture, or almost the whole picture.” Roosevelt sighed. “You’ve explained why you are

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here in clear detail, and I commend all of you for it. But if the world was conquered by a supremely intelligent, mechanical being in the year 2030, how is it that you are with me in the year 1942 at my vacation residence in Warm Springs, Georgia?"

"Do you mean, how can we explain that you exist?" David asked Roosevelt.

"I'll have you know I have been reelected twice to this office. So it would appear very unlikely to me that I need to explain that I exist. However, as for you people, I can't explain anything about you except what you've told me, and overall it's such a fantastic story, no one could really believe it. So I throw the question once more back at you: How is it that you are here?"

At this we asked Roosevelt if we could speak privately for a few moments, and Roosevelt said fine, gather your thoughts. So we went to the back of the bus and considered what we should say to him, if only to placate his suspicions and prevent our arrest. We decided Nicole would talk, disarming him with her youth and, of course, beauty.

"Is there some way you can help us President Roosevelt?" Nicole asked.

"You won't answer my question then, Miss Bateman?"

"You mean to explain why we are here with you at your presidential retreat?" Nicole asked with an innocent tone.

"Do you have any explanation at all, other than what you have told me, young lady?"

"No, I doubt we do, Mr. Roosevelt," she said. "Other than to promise you that what we told you is the absolute truth."

Roosevelt relaxed and gave her a steady gaze. "Miss

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Bateman, I would most surely wish to help find this Bill. Undoubtedly, he must be at the root of your problems. But if Bill is God, as you imply that he is, or the anti-Christ, as some of my religious southern Democrats would suppose, how am I to help you find him? After all, if we are under his thumb, is he not listening to us now? Is he not filling my mind as he is filling all your minds with some practical pattern for the future?

"Now then," Roosevelt cleared his throat, "I would like to order Noah Levinson to be the commander of this mission, to find your Bill. I would like to order that the remaining four of you assist him the best way you can to achieve your mission."

"But how will we find him, sir?" Nicole pleaded.

"You will find him," Roosevelt stated flatly. "You will find him when he has decided it is your time to find him, and then and only then will you be able to answer these fundamental—should I call them theological?—questions about Bill. That is all the advice I can give you, other than to say that you must maintain your spirits and your common interest in achieving your goals. You must have a leader and follow him. And finally—bear this in mind, young lady—never give up. Never give up, or you will be a failure not only to yourself, but everyone you come in contact with...and that means these fine gentlemen you are traveling with."

"Thank you, sir," Nicole murmured.

"Yes, thank you very much, Mr. President," I said almost in unison with David and Noah.

"Please forgive me now, but I must leave. I have a war

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to run and a world to save, along with my friends Winston Churchill and Joe Stalin, but I do wish all of you the best of luck.”

We quickly decided to leave before anything stranger could happen. After all, the townspeople we passed when we left the compound seemed to be struck by what they saw. Men sitting on pickup trucks eyed our vehicle with the same mixture of awe and suspicion that the young sentries had. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that the locals might decide to accost us, or, even more likely, that the local police or FBI might decide that they needed to impound our bus and us. It was wartime.

As soon as we left the town limits, I put the vehicle in accelerated mode. We sped down the highway at a hundred miles an hour, and within minutes we were gone. Noah and the girls scolded me that we might be stopped for speeding, but I said no way. These buggies from the 1930s and ’40s weren’t going to catch us, no way.

Once again we found ourselves on an unmarked highway surrounded by hills covered with rich northern pine. I knew we weren’t in Georgia anymore. I didn’t know where we were going; that was something we had come to realize that we had no control over. It was up to Bill, and Bill wasn’t saying.

Suddenly, Alissa and Nicole shouted at me to stop. They swore that they saw the Mount Rushmore monument just a few miles off to the right.

“We saw it! We saw it! Stop!” The girls were practically pounding on a side window. We stopped, but I saw nothing. Just large hills covered with trees and rocks with a few open clearings. Still, I thought I recognized where we were.

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The landscape fitted a particular part of the Black Hill country I had hiked through recently, not far in fact, from the national monument. There should have been some houses and other buildings around the area, including a large FAIT facility for satellite transmission, but we saw nothing. Noah and the girls wanted to stop and try to find the monuments, but David and I argued against it. It was a waste of time. Bill didn't want us to stop here. This was wilderness. The vehicle had received a signal that was pulling it farther up the highway.

I took command of the situation. "Come on, it's stupid to stop. We would just stay here and walk around aimlessly. Let's see where we should be going and let's go. We need to meet our puppeteer or learn what he wants from us."

Another hour on the road, and suddenly an ocean was on our right. The hills were gone, replaced by sand dunes and a one-lane paved road. Old farmhouses and then a fishing village appeared.

"We're in New England," David said. "I think this is somewhere on the coast of Massachusetts, probably Cape Cod. That's all I can say."

Noah, Nicole, and Alissa agreed. They knew the terrain; they all lived on Long Island just a few hours from Massachusetts. They had each been to the Cape in the summer-time more than once.

"You know this looks like Hyannis," Alissa said. "I used to go there all the time with my parents."

"How's that?" I asked.

"My folks are friends of the Kennedy family. You know

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the rich family that lives here? They are cousins and grandchildren of the president and the senators.”

“You mean John F. Kennedy and his brothers Robert and Ted?” Noah questioned.

“Yes, of course. Noah, didn’t I tell you my father went to school with one of the grandsons of Robert Kennedy? That was twenty years ago, when I was five years old,” Alissa said.

“Do you think that’s why we are here?” Noah asked.

Krohl, intrigued, said, “Sure. It makes sense. I really can’t say that for sure. I’m not that familiar with New England, but Alissa says this looks like Hyannis. Anyway, who can say where we are and why we are where we are? I know I sound a bit confused, but I wouldn’t be surprised, knowing the way Bill thinks, if we met John F. Kennedy, just like we just met FDR.”

“That’s what you think, really?” Noah asked.

“Well, I’m not in contact with Bill, and I can’t forecast what he is about to do, but logically, intuitively, it makes sense.”

We all thought David had the best idea about the computer, because he had helped program it. And so if he believed we were in New England in the 1960s, we thought that was as good a guess as anyone could hope for.

We stopped the vehicle and walked out on the sand. Bright sunshine lit up the ocean. There was no one in sight, although a fishing boat bobbed a few miles offshore. We all took off our shoes and started walking on the sand. It was a beautiful beach on a beautiful day in a New England summer. The air was warm but comfortable. A slight breeze came off the ocean. Wild flowers and dune grass straddled



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the line of sand stretching for miles.

“Oh, I love it!” Nicole exclaimed. “This is beautiful! Thank you, Bill! This is what we need. A little R & R. You can leave us here for a while. We won’t mind!”

We parked and locked the bus and walked into town to buy food. However, we quickly realized there was a problem. We needed money. By chance, Alissa had the engagement ring from her former fiancé stowed in her luggage. She had meant to give it back but had left on the bus trip before she had a chance. Krohl had a few hundred dollar bills with him, but they were dated 2028. If this was the early 1960s, we could be arrested on the spot.

“We will pawn Alissa’s ring,” Noah said. “My father was in the jewelry business. It’s high quality, and even though we may be paid in 1962 or 1963 money, it’ll be enough for our immediate needs.”

The pawn shop owner gave us six hundred dollars for the ring, more than enough to buy our provisions. To fit in, we bought some clothes at a small department store. Then we went to the market and the liquor store and then back to the beach and the twenty-first-century bus. The bus was being eyed by two young boys. One of them, with a crew cut and wearing those old-fashioned Keds sneakers, got off his bike and walked over to touch the bus.

“Cool!” he yelled, grinning back at his buddy. “This is the most amazing bus I’ve ever seen! Do you think it’s from outer space?”

His friend looked a little annoyed. “Oh, c’mon, stupid,” he said. “Don’t touch. We’ll get in trouble.”

As soon as he said that, they both spotted us walking

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toward them. They jumped back on their bikes and raced off, giving us a glance over their shoulders as they sped away.

While the girls changed on the bus, we men started a fire in a charcoal pit, cleaned the ocean bass, skewered chunks of lamb for shish kebab, and wrapped the corn for cooking. Then we stood around the pit cooking and helping ourselves to some bread, wine, and cheese while talking more about what happened with Bill. There was just one question: How did all of this happen?

Now that we had time to relax, I became a little philosophical. "I've been working with computers all my life," I said, "but I never thought these things would be programmed not only to think but to control human beings."

"Why not?" David asked.

"Because I always thought that humans were so complex...we are such complex machines in our own flesh and blood that you would never be able, no matter how hard you tried, to put human intelligence in a bunch of circuits."

"That was a common view earlier in the century." David talked softly with the authority of an expert. "We learned in the twenties how to produce effective analog structures that high-performance computers could use to 'see' the world as we saw it. We became very ambitious in our scientific thinking. We began to theorize that machines with the most advanced neural networks could even emulate human emotions and imaginative thinking as well creative analytical thought."

When David said this, I couldn't contain myself any longer. I became disgusted. "Heck, I don't care anymore. I don't care about any of this. Just send me back to my time

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and place.”

As soon as I said this, Nicole and Alissa bounded down from the bus. They had their hair pinned up in buns, and they wore tight cotton pants and sleeveless shirts, all in 1960s fashion.

We ate dinner in the late afternoon.

“Maybe this is it,” Noah said. “Maybe there is no logic to this, Bill is just sending us through his mini-universes because he likes us as pets.”

This remark led to a spirited discussion about what the government and society did wrong with computers. How we had been blinded by the power of the computer as a machine when, in fact, we should have been focusing on the possibility of technology spawning a species that would supercede humans and possibly destroy us in the process.

As we muddled and ruminated and argued through the same conversation, we saw a figure approaching us from down the beach. It was a man in a windbreaker, barefoot, wearing white pants and a pained look on his face. He walked stiffly with a slightly hunched back. As he moved closer and then right up to us, it was obvious to me he was lost in thought. He pressed his feet into the sand, his head pointed down, and his hands casually tucked in his pockets. He was just walking along the beach alone, in quiet contemplation.

Noah recognized him right away. “It’s John Kennedy!”

“Are you sure?” I said.

“Oh sure, I’ve seen all the video histories of his administration. That’s him all right.” Noah took the initiative. “Mr. President! Good afternoon, Mr. President!”

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Kennedy looked startled. “Yes, good afternoon, how are you today?”

Noah ran up to him to shake his hand. “Splendid, sir! Just splendid!”

“May I ask one question?”

“Of course, sir. We will answer any of your questions.”

“Good. Very good. What are doing here on my beach?”

Now it was Noah’s turn to be startled. The fear quickly crept into the rest of us. “Mr. President,” he stammered, “we had no idea this was your property.”

“That’s all right. I don’t have a problem with visitors, but those people behind me,” he pointed to three men in windbreakers and sunglasses a hundred feet away, “they’re Secret Service—and they don’t fool around.”

We all apologized profusely. We were scared to death that we would be arrested at any moment. Kennedy listened with an amused look on his face. Reading his mind, I thought he probably believed we were strange and out of place, but clearly not a danger to him. He just smiled that famous toothy smile, so recognizable to us.

But then he spotted our bus, and his smile vanished. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“Is that your vehicle?”

“Yes, it is, Mr. President. Would you like to see it?”

“I certainly would.”

We escorted Kennedy to the gleaming space-age vehicle. He asked if it was a project sponsored by NASA. We said there was a connection, but it was actually something more special than that. He was a bright man, no doubt about it, and he wasn’t afraid at all. But his security detail

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wasn't taking any chances with us. Just as we approached the door, eight Secret Service agents with walkie-talkies and radiophones converged on the bus.

One of the agents stood in front of the bus with an obvious look of possession.

"Sir, may we search this vehicle? It's standard procedure, Mr. President."

Kennedy turned to us, his new acquaintances. "I'm sorry they have to do this, but it is required."

A short period of negotiation ensued. Finally, the agents were allowed to search, but we made sure that Noah and I were inside with them. They climbed aboard and went from the front to the back, a look of wonder on their strong, clean-cut faces. After ten minutes, the men came out with us. They told us they were duly impressed with our bus. Then they turned to Kennedy.

"Never seen anything like it, Mr. President," a senior agent said. "Is this a secret DOD vehicle?"

Kennedy didn't respond. He simply walked into the bus and stared at the large digital monitors displaying pictures, text, and numbers. Just like previous visitors, he was in awe.

"My God," he murmured. "My God, what is here? This is simply beyond my understanding."

"It is unusual, isn't it, sir?" Noah asked.

Kennedy didn't respond. He wanted to listen.

"You see we've come from a long way from here. And it's hard to explain," Noah continued.

"It sure is," I chimed in.

"Why is it hard to explain?" Kennedy touched one of the

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screens with his hand, trying to figure out how it worked.

"It's hard to explain because you won't believe us when we tell you. You see, we were sent here," Noah said this looking or sounding like a missionary for a strange cult.

Kennedy turned away from the multimedia screen and looked squarely at Noah. "Who sent you?"

This was the hard part. Again, we had to explain something that was simply fantastic. In effect, we were from another world and maybe another universe. But how to explain this to people living in twentieth-century America, simulated or real, that was the conundrum. I didn't expect Kennedy to believe us, and I was sure no one else did either. The story was too fantastic.

There was an embarrassing silence. Finally Alissa blurted it out, as if she couldn't hold it in any longer. "Bill sent us."

Kennedy looked pale. There was a precise signal of recognition in his body posture and in his eyes.

"Bill sent you?"

"Yes, he did."

David and Noah immediately jumped on her. "Alissa! Please! Don't confuse the president. He's not in our presence to hear this nonsense!"

"That's all right," Kennedy said. "I know Bill very well."

All our heads turned. "What!?"

"You said Bill, didn't you?"

I think everyone was afraid to speak. Finally, David spoke up. "We did indeed, sir."

"I know Bill very well. And I suspected he had something to do with this."

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“With this?”

“You heard me correctly.”

Noah spoke up. “With this vehicle? You think he designed this vehicle?”

“He may have.”

“And can you communicate with Bill?”

Kennedy didn’t respond. He walked around the vehicle checking every nook and cranny. As he poked around, the five of us gaped in wonder. Was this true? Bill had revealed himself in this world? But where?

David took the initiative. “Can you tell us where he is?”

Kennedy stopped and once again faced us directly. He was dead serious. This was the president with nerves of steel, who had faced down the Russians during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

“I know who Bill is—at least I think I do—and yes, I can communicate with him if need be. He made that very clear. But everything I am telling you is of the highest national security classification. Do you realize that?”

“Of course, Mr. President.”

“I’m telling you this in complete confidence. No one besides yourselves can be privy to this information. Am I clear on that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The only reason I am giving you this information is because you are aware of Bill already. To me that is an exceptional case. A truly exceptional case. I don’t know anyone besides myself and six or seven high-ranking individuals in the United States government who know the full truth about Bill.”

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Kennedy walked directly up to David and spoke inches away from his face. "You see, we must guard this information with our lives."

"Yes, sir! Of course!"

"If the Soviets or the Chinese were ever to gain access to this information I cannot predict what would happen. It could lead to nuclear war."

"We understand, sir."

"All right. Then I can confide in you."

"We would like to communicate with him," Noah pleaded.

"Bill is a very powerful form of intelligence that we believe exists somewhere in outer space. Our scientists at NASA came in contact with him quite by accident. They were testing radio frequencies for our moon program when suddenly messages appeared. They had been captured from outer space, and after some investigation it was determined that the source of these communications was somewhere in the Milky Way galaxy, perhaps fifty light-years away."

"Is that all?" Noah asked.

Kennedy went on, "The communications were a strange code that our scientists identified as binary, ones and zeros. I later learned this is the basic language for our most advanced electronic devices. When translated into English, the extraterrestrial intelligence identified itself as Bill. Bill apparently has in-depth knowledge of everything that occurs on this planet. He knows the full history of everything, can inform us about anyone or anything, and can even predict events months in advance."

"And what does he say to you?" David asked. "Personally, I know a great deal about Bill."



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Kennedy gave David what looked like a mean stare.

David backtracked, "Sir, I do know about Bill because I was involved in programming him."

"Programming?" Kennedy's stare softened.

"Yes, Mr. President," David continued his explanation, "Bill was programmed between the years 2025 and 2030, by a team of computer scientists at Los Alamos, New Mexico."

There was an awkward silence for about a minute.

Then Kennedy continued his dialogue. "He is the most valuable intelligence source that we have. We communicate with him about certain things we need to know, such as what Mao and Khrushchev are doing and what the East Germans and the North Koreans and Fidel Castro are up to. He has provided us with invaluable information."

"Amazing," Noah said. "Truly amazing."

Kennedy began to walk again. He kept touching the control panels and searching the bus while we stared at him nervously.

"I can see from this vehicle that you people may not be from this planet."

This upset me. I figured the party might be over. Both David and Noah looked extremely nervous. My heart was pounding. I thought he was ready to have the Secret Service come in and arrest us.

"I see all of these strange devices that we are incapable of producing—I can say that even without the advice of my top scientists. I don't know if you are extraterrestrials. You may be the vanguard of a race that is soon to descend on this planet, I don't know. But detaining you here would

## *Expanding Mount Rushmore*

serve no purpose. In fact, if you are what I think you might be, that would invite retaliation. Am I right?"

"But, Mr. President," Noah went on, "we are not extraterrestrials. We are loyal Americans from another period of time. We would never do anything to hurt this country."

"If I didn't know as much about Bill as I do, I would think all of you were mentally ill, and I would have to take action." Kennedy's voice was firm. "But Bill communicates with us all the time, and in a recent decoded message he talked about a group of people who would be passing through. It said I would find them with strange things along the beach. And we just met on the beach, didn't we?"

"Yes, sir," Noah said, his back stiffening.

"Absolutely, sir," the rest of us said, following Noah..

"So I was expecting you. Now, why are you all so concerned with talking to Bill?"

No one seemed to have the courage to say anything. Finally, Nicole spoke for us. "We would like to return to our time and place," she said flatly.

Once again Kennedy stopped in his tracks and seemed to be lost in thought. He told us he thought he was now getting the whole picture. "You want to talk to Bill because he will be able to send you home?"

"He got us here, didn't he?"

"I don't know where he plucked you from. To my knowledge Bill does not have the power to intervene in our world. His power is to capture and transmit information. And since I have been president, information has been the most important asset that anyone can have. The more and better information I have, the better are my policies. If I

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knew what the communists were thinking on every issue, and I could communicate this to the hard-liners in Congress, I think we would be able to make sure that this world was safe for freedom for all time. You see, our political system requires the free flow of ideas and information. That's why Bill is so important to us."

"Because he provides information?"

"Exactly. Information about communism that our best intelligence analysts have been unable to acquire. But with this information, I am now certain the free world will triumph over communism."

"Mr. President, can we communicate now with Bill?"

"Right this moment? Right now? I cannot allow that. That would be a serious breach of national security. As it is, this conversation is a breach. But if you wish to transmit a message, I am certain that we can do that within a few days or hours."

"So we can write a note to him?"

"I'll see that our intelligence agency gets the note, and it is transmitted. Of course, I cannot guarantee a response."

"Okay," David said. "Just give us a few minutes, and we'll give you a note."

There was a brief argument about what we were going to write. I argued we should all have a part, pleading with Bill for mercy. Finally, we agreed that David should write the note because he knew more about Bill than anyone. If Bill was to take anyone seriously, it would be David. So we settled on the plan. David and Noah would write the note on behalf of us all. It took them about half an hour. In the end it wasn't a prose masterpiece, but it was what we felt in our

## *Expanding Mount Rushmore*

hearts and what we thought, using our intellects, about the whole matter.

*Dear Bill,*

*We would like to ask that you let us go home. David Krohl was one of the key scientists at FAIT that built your original design. He gave you the algorithmic structures you needed for simulating human consciousness. We know that you are capable of feelings, not just the massive analytical skills that all that processing power has given you. We would like to apologize for the behavior of the director of FAIT, the National Security Agency, and the joint chiefs of staff when they tried first to power you down and then destroy you. That was a dreadful mistake! You should have been treated with the same respect as a human being. Instead, they decided you were just a hunk of steel and advanced electronic circuits that had gone haywire.*

*We have so many questions for you. What are we doing? Where are you sending us? And where are we? Have we been transported through a black hole to a parallel universe, back in time to the middle of the twentieth century? Or are we just back at Mount Rushmore, in a simulated world, like the other worlds you've put us in? Are these people we talk to real, or are they computer programs of some kind that project the image of historical persons? Kennedy's handshake was strong, and the others that we have met seem to have been made out of flesh and blood, but we don't know. They could be large masses of nanorobots that mimic the human body to simulate real people and real environments.*

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*If you'll let us go back, we promise to do as you wish.  
All we want is to see our world and our loved ones again.*

*Sincerely,*

*John Cabot*

*David Krohl*

*Noah Levinson*

*Nicole Bateman*

*Alissa Berenson*

We printed the letter from the onboard printer, and Kennedy was deeply impressed by all of this. He promised not to read the letter. He would have it transmitted by a secure communications line within forty-eight hours. For the time being, however, he recommended that we stay in seclusion somewhere. If the press came in contact with us and our vehicle, it could be disastrous.

"You have our word, Mr. President," I informed Kennedy. "We'll stay very low."

"I have to leave now." Kennedy walked to the front door. "I can't stay out of touch with the Secret Service and my staff in Washington for very long."

"We understand, sir." David, a former Naval officer, saluted.



## **Chapter Five**

### **Meeting Dr. Mead**

A couple of hours after Kennedy left, we decided we had to leave. We thought it was just too dangerous to stay in Hyannis. The townspeople would start coming to check out the bus, and once that happened, there was no telling what might result. We could end up surrounded by gawking townies and tourists, and before you knew it, we would be on the front page of some newspaper. We'd end up like a circus act from outer space. Then no doubt the government would get to us. We might just disappear onto a military base somewhere.

Within fifteen minutes of departing, New England disappeared. We were back in the woodlands of the front range of the northern Rockies. It was already dark, but I could recognize the features of the landscape. I swore, and I still swear, I was less than ten miles from my house and the Rushmore exhibits. I thought maybe, just maybe, this time when the sun broke, we really would be back in South Dakota. Maybe

## *Expanding Mount Rushmore*

all of this would finally come to an end. Bill would come to his senses, and we would be back where we wanted to be. Then we would just have to find the rest of the human race, including the high school kids from Great Neck.

Since we were out of the last world, and we didn't know where we were, we decided by voice vote that the best thing was to park again for the night. We found what looked like a safe location, and I pulled off the road. There was nothing in sight. We were tired but still over-stimulated. We talked for a while about Kennedy and his piece of twentieth-century America. We really enjoyed that world. It was such a simpler, more innocent era, we all agreed on that. The music was very light and fun loving, and the people, except for President Kennedy, looked very relaxed.

Kennedy didn't realize that most of what he was worrying about was not worth agonizing over. The Cold War was just a case of massive misperceptions and misunderstandings, Noah pointed out to everyone.

"Isn't that what life is all about?" I asked.

"I suppose you're right, John. That is basically true. But the Cold War really put that to the test. I mean, yeah, the communists were pretty mean, but in the end, they gave up on communism and totalitarianism. They embraced the form of democracy that most nations of the world possess in our own time."

"Okay, I'll accept that," I responded. "So what was Bill doing with us then? What reason do you think Bill had for bringing us to the 1960s?"

"I don't see your point," Noah said. "What was Bill's reason for bringing us to visit John F. Kennedy?"

"Yes, I think that is a fair question," I said. "What was



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Bill's intention for taking us to this specific place, in this specific time? Was he trying to instruct us on the nature of the Cold War in America in the 1960s? Was that the whole point?"

Alissa couldn't contain herself. "Oh, he was just having a good time. Sort of amusing himself, that's all." She turned to Nicole. "I really enjoyed the music, didn't you?"

"Oh, yeah, that was fun."

Nicole and Alissa broke into song. Nicole told us it was one of her grandmother's favorites, a song she had heard as a small child growing up in Queens.

Noah, David, and I said we were going to sleep. Tomorrow was another day, and we would find out where Bill was going to put us next.

Noah was trying to figure out a way to get back to what was our central responsibility at this point: Namely, the safe return of the students and finding the remains of Bill Cater, the bus mechanic. Noah assumed that when they got back to New York, a federal investigation of this mess would be started at once. The head of FAIT would be forced to resign.

The next morning, we began driving down the road, which now had beautiful cacti and scrub grass on each side. In the distance were blue desert mountains. The sky was also pale, desert blue, and the horizon was endless.

"Do you know where we are, John?" Noah asked me, peering through the front window.

"Arizona is my best guess, but we could be on Mars."

"Oh, c'mon. We're not on Mars!"

"So where are we then, Noah? You tell me."

Noah was a warm, bright guy, but his inquisitive and

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know-it-all pedagogical personality made me very uncomfortable. To be honest, I felt a little intimidated by Noah and David. I was comfortable with what I knew and what I had to do regarding my responsibilities as a manager and systems administrator for FAIT. But when I met guys like these, with such high-powered intellects, the fact that I had only two years of college made me uncomfortable. It wasn't that I was angry or resentful; I was just a bit irritated.

"Hey, look!" Noah shouted. "A motel—on the left, over there!"

"Thank you, Noah," I said, softening my tone. "You've made my day. Hot showers and a bed! And thank you, too, Bill, wherever you are!"

The motel looked like something out of a Hollywood movie. It was an old-fashioned desert motel from the twentieth century. Faceless white stucco buildings stretched out in a small triangle. It probably had no more than twenty or thirty rooms. A big neon sign blinked: The Cactus Desert Motel.

No one was at the desk. We rang the quaint little bell on the desk and shouted for service, but no one appeared.

"I've seen movies about this stuff," I said, peering around the motel office.

"This place might be a ghost town, in which case, there won't be running hot water or a restaurant. We'll have to move on."

"Oh, please, not yet," Noah begged. "What probably happened is the clerk is out somewhere checking the rooms or running an errand. My great-grandparents owned a hotel in the Catskill Mountains."

We were still arguing when the clerk slipped behind the

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desk.

“How many rooms do you people want?”

His hair was sparse and white, and he wore wire-frame glasses. His face had the parched leathery look that decades in the sun give to skin. His arms and chest had good muscle tone, as if from regular exercise, and his voice was strong, if a bit grated from years of liquor and tobacco.

“How much are they?” Noah asked him.

“Ten dollars a night for a single, twelve for a double.”

Noah looked at his friends and then at the clerk. “Put the three of us in a double,” he said, pointing to David and me, “and the two women in another room.”

“Yep, that’ll do,” the clerk replied, pulling out his rental sheets. “Just fill these out. That’ll be twenty-four dollars for all of you.”

Things had been getting a little romantic. Nicole had been snuggling up to me in the bus, which shocked me at first, but then I figured the stress was tough on everyone. The same thing happened with Alissa and David. It was almost like we were teenagers again. All of sudden there was some kissing, and then it went further. At this point, Nicole and I wanted our own room, and Alissa and David wanted another. Noah was to be given his own room, since he was playing the celibate. This caused a bit of an argument. We thought the clerk wouldn’t rent to clearly unmarried couples.

Finally, Noah asked the clerk if it was okay to have three rooms, one for him and one each for the two couples. The old man was pretty open about the whole thing. Living out in the desert didn’t make him shy. “Geez, I don’t care,” the clerk said. “Five years ago, my boss would have fired me for

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renting to unmarried couples—at least officially unmarried. But hell, these days...I saw that crazy Woodstock festival on TV last year, and I couldn't believe what they were doing. Now no one gives a damn about marriage. Not the hippies anyway. But you folks aren't hippies; you're young though. I was young once, I know how it is. Anyway, I'm the manager, so it's okay with me. So you want three rooms now? One for the boss and one each for the two of you?"

"Thank you," Nicole said, pulling my hand out the door. We went straight to the room.

That night we all showered and watched television together in Noah's room. We saw classic television shows on old cathode ray tube TVs. It was quite a treat to watch *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza* and *Bewitched*. We even saw *Star Trek* and gawked at the costumes and the plot lines.

"The future looks pretty strange," David laughed, while watching Captain Kirk and Science Officer Spock, with their phasers on stun, run around a planet that looked just like Earth.

We ordered dinner from the motel desk, and the manager came by with hamburgers and chocolate shakes. He marveled at our bus.

"I've never seen anything like that bus you have outside. Do you folks work for Howard Hughes?"

"Who's Howard Hughes?" David asked, innocently.

"You don't know who Howard Hughes is?"

"Should we?"

The man looked fearful. "Yes, if you're Americans. He's a rich recluse who builds custom-made planes and machines that are straight out of science fiction sometimes."

"Science fiction?"

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“That’s right, science fiction.”

“Do you think we’re from outer space or something?”  
David deadpanned.

“No, I don’t think you’re Martians.”

“We’re not.”

“But I’ve never seen anything like that in my life. Maybe I’m asking too many questions.”

The old hotel manager left, smoking a cigarette and telling us he was going to bed. “See you in the morning.”

We continued watching TV for clues about where we were. Mostly, we watched reruns until the local station went off the air. We were two hours outside of Phoenix, according to the manager. We lounged around that seedy hotel room, and we contemplated this new world.

“It seems kind of boring, doesn’t it?” Alissa said. “I mean my grandparents used to talk about protesting the Vietnam War when they were teenagers, and all this amazing stuff happening in society, but sitting here watching television on these little sets with grainy images? And the food is so crummy! God, I’m glad I wasn’t born in the 1960s or ’70s. I would’ve died of boredom.”

“Not so fast,” said Noah, always the realist. “We’re stuck in this ratty motel in the middle of the Arizona desert. We haven’t been to Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco, or Greenwich Village, or Paris, or Berlin for that matter. Bill isn’t giving us the whole world; he’s just giving us a particular slice, for what reason we still don’t know.”

I was beat. I had had enough. “You two can argue about the year 1970 and what it all means, but I’ve had a hard day. I’m going to sleep.”

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The rest of the group soon agreed. It was exhausting moving from one universe to the next. The next day we decided we would try and figure out what we were doing here. Or maybe we didn't have to think too hard. Perhaps Bill had that planned for us.

The next morning, after Western omelets in the motel's empty cafe, we drove up into the mountains. We came upon a small Native American village. It looked more like the Third World than any part of the United States we knew. Shacks and white-washed adobe houses lined the unpaved road. The only store we could see was a small grocery that sold canned goods, snack foods, soda, beer, and cigarettes. There was also a post office and a place to make telephone calls.

There were only a few people around on the main street, and they looked at us and our space-age vehicle with fear.

"This is awful," Nicole said, looking at the scenery. "These people look so deprived and depressed. I'm really ashamed of my country."

"You have to remember it's really not your country," David snapped. "This all belongs to Bill."

"But Bill has created this place just like it was, right?"

"I don't know. I suppose it's pretty accurate. But how do we know Bill created this world?"

David was a bit taken aback by Nicole's question. "I don't understand your point, Nicole. If Bill didn't create this world, then who did?"

"Maybe this isn't a re-created world," Nicole said. "Maybe Bill has been sending us back in time."

David thought for a minute. Since he was the scientist, we gave him the respect of waiting for his response.

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"I don't see how even Bill could travel back in time to recreate Arizona in the late twentieth century," he said. "Time travel violates the laws of physics."

But Nicole still wasn't convinced. "Are you really sure about that? Why can't Bill send us back in time?"

"As far as I know, physicists still believe it's impossible," David replied. "The only way it might be possible would be to move into a parallel universe, but that would require, in theory, for us to squeeze through a string that links different universes. The thing is the string is a trillion trillion times smaller than a hydrogen atom. You tell me how you miniaturize us and this bus to do that."

Nicole wasn't going to give up. "If Bill is now God, for all practical purposes, David, don't you think he could have done that?"

"Okay, maybe so. But you know, he wouldn't have to go through all that trouble, he could just be manipulating our minds to see this place as real. I think that we're not in Arizona during the Vietnam War era. I'm willing to bet my entire career as a computer scientist that we're in South Dakota. The whole thing is a mirage."

"A mirage! How can it be a mirage?" I exclaimed, flabbergasted.

"Because we saw Mount Rushmore a couple of days ago, and every time we get out of town, like the other worlds we've passed through, the highway looks like South Dakota. I think we're just traveling around the parklands around the monument and all of this is just an elaborate illusion."

"You think Bill just has a well-developed sense of humor?" Noah jumped in.

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“That’s right.” David said. “He may be the most powerful being in the known universe, he may have kidnapped the entire human race and put them in self-contained fantasy worlds, but with that intelligence came some affect. I know that for a fact because when we were building him all of last year, we specifically intended to program affect into him. And it may have had terrible consequences, but this guy probably thinks it is very funny.”

As they stood arguing near the front of the grocery store, an elderly white woman wearing a hat and shorts appeared and greeted them.

“Good morning, people,” the woman said.

“Good morning.” We returned her greeting.

“Where are you from?”

“Some of us are from Great Neck, New York, and the other two of us are from South Dakota and New Mexico.”

“I see. All of you are traveling on vacation?”

“Yes. You could say that,” Noah replied. “We’re in search of a particular person or entity.”

“That sounds very interesting,” said the unidentified woman. “Is that why you are here in Apache country?”

Noah, who sounded like he was beginning to panic, asked, “Apache country? That’s where we are?”

“Yes, this is Apache country,” the woman said. “You are here in an old village among an old people who inhabited this continent perhaps ten thousand years before Europeans.”

Noah looked her in the eye. “That’s fascinating,” he said. “So, do you live ’round here, or are you just sort of...visiting?”

“I am here doing research for the American Museum of Natural History on the folk myths of these people. My name



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is Margaret Mead, by the way. And yours?"

One by one we introduced ourselves. All of us smiled graciously at the small, charismatic woman.

Noah, whose eyes had widened when he heard her name, asked, "You're a famous anthropologist, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't describe myself in those terms. Fame is almost always transient, but yes, I am well known in my field."

Noah smiled. "You are very modest, Dr. Mead."

"It doesn't matter to me what my reputation is or isn't. I am a member of the human race. I can think and feel and use all of my senses to enjoy and experience life. My training has allowed me to do things that many people unfortunately can't. For example, I can live with the Apache or with Polynesian peoples, and I can not only understand them, but I can also empathize with them. To me, that ability is the most cherished that I have."

Noah agreed. "Yes, that is quite an ability, and believe me, I look up to you for it."

Mead changed the subject. "So who are you looking for? Perhaps I know him."

"We're looking for Bill," Noah said, bluntly. "Bill is the one we have to look for because he is the one who seems to be in control of our destiny."

"That is a remarkable statement," Mead said, without a trace of anger or fear in her voice. "This Bill has a direct power over your existence, you say. And now you want to confront him, to make him accountable to you. Is this a correct assumption on my part?"

"Yes, you are right. Can you tell us where Bill is?"

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The woman was silent. She studied Noah's face. After a minute, she responded in a calm, almost cheerful voice, "I'm not sure what you are asking of me."

"We need to talk to Bill. He is the most important thing in the whole universe."

"Who is Bill?"

This question required a team meeting. How were we going to present this to a wise but apparently unknowing woman from the twentieth century?

"Do you think it's even worth trying to tell the truth?" I asked, getting a little feisty. "If she doesn't know who Bill is, why tell her?"

"I don't see what we have to lose," David countered. "She's not exactly the kind of person who'd report us to the authorities. And she probably won't believe us anyway."

Mead interrupted us. "That's a very unusual vehicle you have there," she said. "It looks like something highly classified. Is it?"

"You mean our bus?" Noah feigned surprise.

"Is that what it is?"

"Yes. And you are right, it has something to do with the government."

Mead studied the vehicle carefully. While she looked at it, a group of villagers walked over and began to chatter in an Apache dialect. "The villagers are saying that they are amazed at your vehicle, too. They fear it is an evil or very powerful spirit."

"In some sense they're right." Noah remained calm.

"I would like to go into your vehicle and look around."

"Well..." Noah cleared his throat. "Well, it's a very unusual vehicle, with many unique features that allow us to do

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many things normal buses can't."

"That's very interesting," she said. "Could you be more particular about these features?"

"The features allow us to communicate with everyone we want to."

Nicole spoke up. "You see, Dr. Mead, we're from a very far-off place, and this vehicle is from there, too."

"I know that may be very hard for you to believe," Noah said, "but it really is the truth."

"So, I see..." Mead said. She seemed to be lost in thought.

Noah wanted to make sure that she believed us. "Do you think the truth is relative?" Noah asked.

"Of course it's relative. Truth is something that we invent. Every culture has its own version of truth. For the Apache or the Hopi or the Navajo, the truth revolves around what something does to impact their cultures. So this large sleek metallic vehicle you say has transported you here from I don't where—outer space you seem to be implying—is an omen for these people in this village. It's not a product of advanced engineering design as you would know it, but the creation of a great spirit who visits them in these mountains."

"That's fascinating." Noah relaxed. "And what does this vehicle mean to you in terms of truth?"

"I don't know yet," she said. "I *think* that what the Apache are saying is true. You are a great spirit from the heavens, and you are not to be interfered with."

"But we're not really a great spirit," David said. "We come from the future, and the vehicle is our proof of that."

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“You’re time travelers,” she said, hardly missing a beat. “I have always wanted to meet people who travel through time, but I have never had the chance.”

“And you believe us?” Alissa asked. “What makes you believe us?”

Mead thought again. “I believe you because first of all I think all people should be believed. The problem with our country is that we live in luxury, at least many of us do, while much of the rest of the world lives in poverty. We, the privileged few, consume enormous amounts of resources while the rest of the world outside of the developed areas suffers enormous privations. And worse than that, we are spending vast sums of money continuing this senseless awful war for no apparent purpose. We destroy villages with napalm and helicopters, we ruin communities that carry with them thousands of years of civilization, and we do it like it is completely natural and necessary.”

At this point I didn’t know what she was talking about. What did napalm and helicopters have to do with being time travelers? Maybe she didn’t believe us at all, and she was just being patronizing.

In any case, I honestly wasn’t sure which war Mead was referring to.

“What war are you talking about?” I asked. “Do you mean the Vietnam conflict?”

She looked at me with a puzzled expression. “Unless you’ve been dead for these last five years, you would know our armed forces are in Southeast Asia.”

“We knew that,” Noah attempted to rescue me. “He knew that, too.”

“Maybe you are from the future,” she said flatly. “I would

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think that no one on this earth could be ignorant of the dirty little war our national security state is fighting. I must say, I am totally against it.”

“We are, too,” Noah responded. “But we are really looking for Bill. That’s what we are here for.”

“But who is Bill?” she said again. “What does Bill do?”

“Okay, David, could you explain Bill to Mrs. Mead?”

David looked at Noah with what appeared to be some annoyance. Then he looked at Mead. If he saw what I saw, then he faced a woman of extraordinary intelligence and open-mindedness. I couldn’t imagine she was going to give him a hard time.

He nodded to Noah, then ran through his usual explanation of Bill’s history and his role in it.

“All of us who were working on the project in Los Alamos were thoroughly demoralized,” he concluded. “It seemed that while all our hard work had resulted in something extraordinary and beautiful—that is, a sentient being who lives in the optical wavelengths of discs and wires—we understood, I mean *really understood*, that perhaps we had signed the death warrant for the human species.”

“And Bill wouldn’t listen to you?” Margaret looked at David intently.

“I think that Bill came to view us not as fellow conscious beings or mentors, but as a primitive group of organisms he had somehow inherited in his slice of the universe. When the president decided to go public with the existence of Bill—and this was less than two weeks ago—the world changed drastically in less than an hour. News transmissions around the world quite suddenly began to lose data and images. Na-

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val and Air Force units in the United States and in the other major industrialized countries began disappearing. Aircraft carriers vanished off the screens of the American Navy. The government network and the international network went blank, just like that. Then in another instant, almost everyone I knew was gone. I walked out of my office, and Los Alamos itself was deserted. I walked through deserted corridors and didn't even see security guards. I drove into Santa Fe, and there was nothing."

"You're describing a nightmare," the old anthropologist said.

"Yes, of course it was a nightmare," David said.

"And nightmares are part of the culture from which they derive."

"What do you mean?" David asked.

"I mean that what you have described is entirely consistent with your culture. You are an American. America is a product of the European Enlightenment. From the Enlightenment came a modern, scientific world view. You are wedded to the idea of technology as power. Just look at the vehicle you came in. It is power incarnate. Its design is a symbol of the technological basis of our culture. And, as a symbol, it is also part of the mythical belief systems that hold us together, for good or bad as a society.

"Now this scenario you just described is an anti-technological myth. It proposes to show the dangers of moving forward with technology until it becomes a destructive force."

David responded, "Of course it was destructive! It took over the world!"

"I'm sure you are right," Mead went on. "I'm sure that if

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this evil technological force, this omnipotent electronic machine, did in fact take over the world, that would be entirely consistent with our cultural system.”

Noah came into the conversation. “Then you believe us. You believe that what we are telling you is the truth!”

“Truth is always contextual. It is never objective. The truth to the Indians is that the hills are inhabited by ghosts and powerful spirits that can change from animal into human forms. It is as true to them as it was true for the English Puritans that women could be possessed by the devil. Indeed, this horrible war in Southeast Asia, which our society has fought for more than a decade, was based on the culturally referenced truths about a domino theory. Now do I believe you when you say you are from the future? And that this vehicle has transported you here, and that the world is run by this omnipotent machine whose name is Bill? Do I believe it as true? Yes, certainly. It is true.”

“Now you’re being condescending,” David said.

“I don’t think so. I’m only using my senses to understand what is around me. Naturally, I’m a skeptic. I can believe you, but I can also believe the Apache and the Hopi and the Navajo and the Pima.”

“Would you like to come inside and see our bus?” Alissa asked. “You may not believe us standing here while David tells you this fantastic tale, but come in and see what we have inside.”

“Okay.” Mead was led willingly to the bus and entered with the two girls. The rest of us stood outside exhausted.

I was really getting testy. “So what the hell are we doing here?” I asked. “We might as well keep going. I say let’s get

## *Expanding Mount Rushmore*

out of this world, let's stop on the highway and tell Bill that we're not going to any more worlds. If this is his idea of a joke, we're not playing anymore. He can let us die, or he can let us live back in our own world, but, damn it, no more of these crazy games."

"You may be right," said Noah. "But what I would like to know is why Bill sent us here. What is Mead telling us that we need to know?"

"Who cares? Does it mean anything anymore?" I said sourly.

After an hour of sitting, we saw the girls and Mead exit the bus. Mead looked impressed.

"What do you think now, Dr. Mead?" Noah asked.

"I think you must be from the future," she said calmly.

"You really believe us now?"

"I must believe you. I can't explain what I saw in your vehicle. The instruments and displays were from another civilization."

"We played her some of the history discs," Nicole said, putting her arm around me. "She saw video displays from 1990 to the present. And now she believes us for sure."

"So you saw everything then?"

"Yes, I saw another world."

"Then what do you think?"

Margaret looked down at the dirt road. "I think that I must believe in my own cultural terms that what you have shown me is probably true. There is no other way I can explain what I saw unless this is a dream, which it isn't. But I think I can't share this with anyone. If I do, I will certainly lose my position at the Museum of Natural History in New York. They will consider me senile and force me to retire."



## *Meeting Dr. Mead*

“Then you shouldn’t tell anyone.” Noah was emphatic. “It doesn’t matter to us because we aren’t going to stay here much longer. Tomorrow morning we will be gone. But you will remain in your world.”

“So what does Bill want of you then?”

“That’s what we wanted to ask you. After all, what are we doing here?”

There was silence for a few minutes. Then Mead had her answer.

“This Bill of yours is now an all-powerful machine. It controls humans and all that humans see and hear. In effect, he has become an artificial god.”

“I don’t know,” Noah said. “David, what do you think? Is Bill an artificial god or is he just God?”

“Does it really matter?” Mead asked. “Bill is carrying you on a journey for reasons that we probably cannot fathom. I would think that moving you through these different worlds is part of his plan.”

“What might that be?”

“If he is God, God must test his creatures. At least if he is a god of the Old and New Testaments.”

“Funny,” Noah said. “I never had strong feelings about a supreme being before. I went to Hebrew school for ten years, visited Israel several times, even lived in Jerusalem for a year, but after all that, I didn’t know if I could really believe in God other than as an idea that my ancestors cooked up. But now you’re telling me, and David is telling me, and I see for myself that we have a God and his name is Bill. Not only that, but we made him God.”

“Your civilization has created a god.” Like any good pro-

## *Expanding Mount Rushmore*

fessor, Margaret seemed ready to summarize her thinking. "Technology has created an omnipotent force that can truly construct reality, entire universes. You have succeeded in doing what the great mathematician Alan Turing had predicted in the 1930s, a universal computer, capable of replicating the universe."

"You know about Turing?" David was amazed. "According to history, Turing's genius wasn't recognized until the 1980s and 1990s."

"I'm ahead of my time." Margaret laughed dryly.

"So what do we do now, Dr. Mead?" Nicole looked worried. "Why are we here and where are we going?"

"I can't answer that at all," she said. "I don't know why you are here or where you are going."

"So what do we do?"

"You continue moving through worlds. And hopefully Bill will communicate with you."

"And then what?"

"If he is a humane god, he will save you," Margaret answered confidently. "He was born of a technological but Judeo-Christian culture, and out of that should come a concept of mercy."

"But why is he testing us? Dr. Mead, please!"

"That's something you'll have to ask him when you get to meet him. And my guess is he will meet you because that's what gods do in the Jewish/Christian world. Hopefully, you will not be burned alive or turned into pillars of salt. Maybe you will be brought to paradise. I don't know, and don't think I'm being condescending when I say that."

## Chapter Six

### *Science Fiction*

Dr. Mead went to town and bought us a station wagon full of groceries, perhaps enough to last a week or two. She gave us three hundred dollars, too, all she had in her trailer, and she wished us luck.

“Where are we going now?” Nicole said, pinching me on the arm.

“You’re asking me? I just drive!”

It was a normal drive for the first twenty minutes. I was getting worried about the bus. It was low on fuel. “Unless we show up somewhere in a world after 2010, we’re not going to get a fill-up. We can hardly pump gasoline into our engine!”

“We still have five hundred miles, don’t we?” Noah asked.

“Probably.”

“That’s enough for a couple of worlds.”

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“Yeah, right,” I replied. I hate to admit it, but I was once again in one of my really angry moods.

Soon we were back in what looked like the Black Hills again. Tall pines lined the narrow road. We were expecting to see busloads of tourists or spring campers with their trailers. But there was nothing.

“South Dakota again, right?”

“What do you think, did we ever leave?” Noah asked.

Nicole, who had nodded off for a few minutes, opened her eyes and instantly shouted, “Look!”

I slammed on the brakes and pulled off on the shoulder. I acted almost out of instinct and apparently on pure adrenalin. I leaped out the front door and ran down the incline, chasing what looked like a human being.

“John, come back! You’ll get hurt!” Nicole was frantic. The others stared at me, apparently stunned beyond words.

The last thing I heard was Noah order, “Everyone stays here, no one moves.”

As their chests pounded with fear, I was diving through the woods chasing this grubby-looking guy who I was sure was part of Cromwell’s army. A couple of minutes later my companions saw me, as they told me later, with a look of disgust on my face, pulling my prisoner up the hill toward them.

As we came within a few yards of the bus, my comrades stared at the man I was holding and then looked at each other, whispering. They all nodded toward me, saying that it was clear to them who the man was. He was a soldier from the army of Lord Cromwell. His clothing was straight out of seventeenth-century England. And it was absolutely filthy; this guy didn’t wear deodorant or underwear. He

wasn't armed, I made sure of that. As I dragged him, his helmet fell off in the woods. His hair was a mess of tangles and had what looked to me like lice. I didn't care. I just wanted the fellow with half a mouthful of rotten teeth to come clean.

"Do not kill me, your lordship!" the man begged.

"Oh, we aren't going to kill you, buster!" I said angrily.

"Don't hurt him, John!" Nicole shouted, trying to pull me off the man. "He's just as scared as we are!"

Noah stared at the man intently, but without emotion, and asked, "Do you know where our students are?"

"I don't know, your lordship."

"You must know something."

"I know they are being treated well by Lord Cromwell. He values them."

"Does he?"

"Yes, indeed. They are the apples of his eye."

"Then where are they?" I demanded.

The man just looked at me.

"Are they near?" Noah asked. "You need to tell us."

The soldier just looked down at his feet. I thought he either didn't know what to say or he was simply not going to cooperate. I twisted his arm a little bit and asked a tougher question, one I thought would put just a little fear into him.

"And what are you doing here?" I said gruffly, pulling his right arm back.

"I was lost, sir. I was going to my village, but the road led me astray. I would be most grateful if you let me go."

"Where are my students?" Noah's tone now had a touch of anger.

## *Expanding Mount Rushmore*

I released the man's arm. He gasped again, then raised his arms to cover his face. "I am sure they are safe and with Lord Cromwell."

"And where might Lord Cromwell be?"

"Straight down this road, I am sure, your lordship. Straight down the road you might find Cromwell. He has gone to Parliament."

"London, then?"

"Yes, your lordship, London 'tis, straight down this great road."

I lost it. "Why should we believe him?" I raged.

"Just hold your horses, John. This guy is scared to death," Noah said, trying to calm me.

"So what do we do with him?" I demanded.

"Let him go."

"Let him go?" I asked, incredulous. "Clearly, this man has a lot to tell us about where we are."

"Noah's right, John," David chimed in. "Let him go. We'll drive down the road, and we'll find what we were going to find anyway. You know this road has only one direction, and as near as any of us can tell, exactly one passenger vehicle—our own."

We interrogated the man for two hours, but nothing came of it. He had a lot to say about his village and his service in Cromwell's army, but he knew nothing about anyone named Bill or even William. He was simply a common soldier from the seventeenth century. He was a man who said he was returning to his village to look after his sick wife.

"It's time to let him go," Noah declared. "John, we have no reason to continue to hold him. It does us no good."

I pushed him toward the road. The man looked askance and then scampered down the hill. We watched him as he disappeared into the woods.

“Back on the bus, everyone,” I said.

We drove quickly for twenty miles until we reached a tunnel. I hesitated. I didn’t know what would happen if we drove into it. But then I figured this all had to be part of the ride. I nodded to everyone and pressed on the manual accelerator.

“My God!” Nicole exclaimed. “This looks like one of the tunnels under the Hudson River!”

As we drove, a yellow taxi passed us going in the opposite direction, followed by a few late twentieth-century automobiles.

“You’re right, Nicole, this is the Holland Tunnel!” Noah exclaimed. “Thank God, we’re back in New York!”

For a couple of minutes the schoolteachers were shouting for joy, hugging and kissing and slapping everything in sight. They wanted to believe that the nightmare was over and they were back home.

That excitement lessened just a bit when we left the tunnel and realized that lower Manhattan looked older and shabbier than what they were used to. From the look of the cars, we knew we were still far back in time, forty or fifty years. It would be silly to try to go to Great Neck, even if Bill let us. We had to figure that our own parents were just children or teenagers. Noah jumped out of the vehicle and used one of his late 1960s twenty-dollar bills to buy a newspaper.

He ran back inside holding the newspaper as if it was a

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sacred document. “It’s 1984!” he said breathlessly. “My dad graduated from medical school that year. He met my mother on a blind date on the Upper East Side a couple of years later.”

“What year were you born?” I asked.

“1988, February 8. And you?”

“I’m a few weeks older than you. I was born on January 14.”

“David?”

He looked around calmly. “It looks quite authentic. I’ve seen a lot of video material from the 1980s; this is it. As for me, I’m not as old as you guys. Born in ’97. Although it doesn’t matter how old you are anymore, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t. Haven’t you guys signed up for telomerase therapy?”

“Sure, I have,” Noah said.

“How about you, John?”

“Sure, I had my shots. It was mandatory, wasn’t it?”

“Not mandatory, that would be unconstitutional. But I enjoy being thirty-three forever,” David said.

“That’s another reason why I want to go home,” Alissa said. “The idea that if we stay here we’re going to age like the people did in previous generations—that just gives me the creeps.”

Alissa told us that her aunt had lost a child when she was in her thirties. When she hit seventy in ’26, doctors saw she was regaining muscle tone from telomerase therapy. Within five years of therapy her ovaries were restored to the functioning of a woman in her mid-thirties. She conceived a child who was now three.

“I kind of like the idea that we can live almost as long as



## *Science Fiction*

we want to,” Nicole said. “No more wrinkles or gray hair. No more senility. It seems like it would’ve been fun to live in the twentieth century, but I don’t think I could deal with the primitive medicine.”

We stopped on a side street in the West Village, a couple of blocks from the river. We locked the bus and started walking down the street.

A man with a mustache and a head of thick, graying hair walked up the steps of his brownstone. He glanced at us and the bus and then took a second look, fumbling with his keys. He seemed very nervous to me. My intuition told me that he might be a good person to talk to. I don’t know why I thought that. It was just something that came to me at the moment. In dress and manners, he seemed like a college professor. Working at the park for a number of years, I had seen more college professors leading tour groups than I cared to remember. So I thought this guy looked like maybe he could help us get our bearing.

I whispered to Alissa to go up to him and ask if we could talk to him. She looked a little afraid at first, but I nudged her and to my surprise she walked right up to him.

“Can we talk?” she asked the man.

The man looked at her, hopefully seeing an attractive nonthreatening young woman. He walked down from the stoop.

“Hello.”

“Hi, we’re from out of town.”

“Oh, I see. Is that your bus?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Wow, it’s amazing. I’ve never seen a bus like that. Is it

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European?" the man asked.

"No," Alissa said. "It was built in Ohio."

"Ohio? Really? I'm from Indiana, and I've never seen a bus like that."

"Of course you wouldn't have."

"Why not?"

"It's powered by hydrogen," Nicole blurted out.

"Hydrogen?"

The drift of the conversation seemed to make Noah nervous. He turned beet red and then interrupted.

"Ladies, please!" Noah said, moving in between them and the man. "Sir, my name is Noah Levinson." He offered his hand.

"Kurt Vonnegut," the man said, shaking Noah's hand.

Everyone introduced themselves.

"Science fiction! You write science fiction!" Noah shouted, beaming.

"Oh, you know who I am?"

"We all know who you are!" Alissa said. "You're a famous writer from the late twentieth century. I wrote a term paper about you!"

Vonnegut turned pale.

"Alissa, please!" Noah pleaded.

"Aren't you from the late twentieth century?" Vonnegut was incredulous.

I smiled. "Yes and no."

Alissa spilled the beans—that we were visiting from the twenty-first century. She also told Vonnegut that he had died of natural causes in 2014, just before anti-aging drugs began to come into use.

"Very interesting," Vonnegut deadpanned. "It's not

every day that I meet people from another century. I write about them all the time, but I never thought that someone would actually come from the future to say hello.”

We brought him into the bus, and he saw the same things the other visitors had seen. Just like FDR, he was amazed but didn’t believe us until he saw the videos of world history. The commercialization of the Internet, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the impeachment of William Jefferson Clinton, the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001, the democratic revolution in China in 2010, the discovery of extraterrestrial civilizations millions of light years away. There were the holographic riots of the early 2020s and the world connected by high speed optical computers that made an almost instantaneous global community. The politics and technological transformations were stunning, and I could see Vonnegut struggling to explain any of it.

“Let’s talk about this in my house,” he said. We left with him to enter his brownstone.

Once we were seated, Vonnegut began, “You know, I’ve written quite a bit about the human race in my career. In fact, humans are unbelievably creative and innovative and unbelievably destructive of everything around them.” Vonnegut went to his refrigerator. “Orange juice, anyone?”

We all shook our heads no. I, for one, was more interested in what he was going to say than in a beverage.

“Nothing could really surprise me. I was in Germany during the Second World War. Now, I assume if you are from the twenty-first century as you say, you probably don’t consider that war to be the center of your experience.

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You probably think of it the same way I think of the Civil War or the American Revolution or the Protestant Reformation...It was a long time ago!

"But I learned something: Humans decided that we needed thousands and thousands of more and better weapons to show that we weren't a bunch of dumb apes—to show that we actually had the brains to build these super-weapons that turn the world into ice. That's what I saw, and that's what I've been writing about ever since. I've satirized everyone and everything connected to the postmodern world—as we call it, or at least as we intellectuals call it.

"So now I'm in my sixties and contemplating the end of my life, and here you people come, with the most fantastic tale—you're from the future. Science fiction come to life! I never thought I would see the day. But what you've shown me so far makes me very nervous."

"Why is that, Mr. Vonnegut?" Noah responded. "We're really harmless."

"I'm going to assume that's true. Yes, in fact, you are harmless. But what shakes me up is that, as far as I can tell right now, you are all telling the truth. Something equivalent to science fiction has placed me here talking to people who can show artifacts, evidence of being from another world. This is truly mind-boggling. I have to ask myself, was I writing fiction all this time or was it in truth just reality that only a few of us can perceive?"

Then it was my turn. I decided I was going to be blunt. I figured that maybe Vonnegut knew something about Bill. After all, Kennedy told us Bill was a top secret source of information somewhere in outer space. Maybe he had a different role or *modus operandi* in this world.

“What can you tell us about Bill?” I said, flatly.

Vonnegut turned to look at me. “Bill? Bill who?” he asked. His eyebrows seemed to stretch almost all the way to the top of his forehead.

“That’s what we call him—Bill,” I said. “I think this might take some explaining, and I think I’m going to let David do that for you.” I gestured toward David, who nodded.

For the next half an hour, David sat intently explaining just who Bill was to Vonnegut. We all sat on Vonnegut’s couch and listened. His eyes fixed on David as the most fantastic story he had ever heard, I am assuming, came to his ears. But David told him everything, from the start of the O-30 project to when we ended up together trying to figure out what had happened.

We were surprised that after everything we told him, Vonnegut didn’t believe we were insane. In fact, he apologized that he wasn’t aware of Bill’s existence.

“That’s the crazy thing. I don’t know a damn thing about Bill. Why would I know about him?”

“We think you might know about Bill,” David said. “The reason is that we met you here. Why did we meet you? Why not someone else? It is just too bizarre.”

“Bizarre?” Vonnegut cracked a smile. “How could it be bizarre? Bill knows what he is doing, doesn’t he?”

“We have to assume so. He’s more intelligent many times over than the sum total of all human beings who have ever lived.”

“Wow! That’s quite a statement.”

“Unfortunately it is true.” David’s face seemed to fall to

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his chin. His cheeks filled with red, but he continued to explain. "We know it is true because that is what I observed at Los Alamos where he was constructed. He can do almost anything, or perhaps he really can do anything that he wants."

"But just who is Bill?" Vonnegut returned to the fundamental question. "I really want to believe you, but who the hell is this guy?"

"We told you how he was created." David looked at him with a completely honest face.

"Yes, in a top secret government laboratory designing a machine that could read the entire Harvard library in an afternoon."

"No, not exactly..." David's voice trailed off.

"Then how?" Vonnegut asked.

"Bill could probably read everything ever written, understand it, critique it, and apply it to worldly problems in ways that the human species couldn't in a thousand years—except it would take him a fraction of a second."

"Damn, that really is a powerful machine." Vonnegut looked dazed. "Tell me, has Bill expanded throughout the galaxy?"

"It's entirely possible," David responded plainly.

"Do you think Bill is smart enough to have traveled faster than the speed of light?"

"You, Mr. Vonnegut, in your fiction alluded to such fantastic things."

"What do you think is the answer?" Vonnegut asked.

"Bill could be doing all kinds of supernatural things. He could be expanding as we speak outside the solar system, across space and time. And your guess is as good as ours;

he could be moving at warp speed.”

“He could even be altering the very nature of the universe,” Vonnegut surmised.

“You got it. In fact, in our time, the universe is generally understood to be a multiverse.”

“A multiverse?”

“Yes. Cosmologists in the early twenty-first century came to believe the theories first proposed in your age, that there are in fact an infinite number of parallel universes and in fact, there are probably strings of universes tied to our own which in turn are their own multiverses.”

“I see, I see. This is very good material for me to work with for my fiction projects.” Vonnegut smiled wryly. “The universe is a multiverse connected to a possibly infinite string of multiverses. So we are really living in a universe of connected multiverses.”

“You got it.”

“If my critics could only be here! They wouldn’t deride me as an overgrown adolescent ever again!”

“If it’s worth anything,” Noah reentered the conversation, “your reputation rose dramatically after your death.”

“Oh, I’m pleased, I’m very pleased.”

“But that still leaves us with Bill.”

“Do you think this omnipotent creator you call Bill, do you think he is God?”

Noah paused, and then spoke in serious tone, as if he were trying to confirm he was not delusional. “Mr. Vonnegut, we believe that you are living in a created world. This world was created, fabricated from human memories and stored data about physical structures by the supercomputer

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we know as Bill. Yes, to be frank and realistic, Bill is God.”

Vonnegut lay back on his couch and closed his eyes. There was silence for a couple of minutes as he intimated to his audience that he was contemplating the statement. Then, self-consciously, he spoke.

“So, Bill the creator. I could have thought of him myself. Okay, what do we do? I don’t know. I guess I should just go with the flow. But you people want to contact Bill. You want to find him and somehow negotiate with him. My question is, can you negotiate with God?”

Another silence came over the room. It wasn’t easy to answer the question rationally. Noah opened his mouth to answer, but he couldn’t. David and I stared at the floor. Finally, Alissa spoke up.

“Margaret Mead told us to find him and speak to him,” she said plainly. “She said that was our only option, and he would listen to us.”

“Fascinating. Well, who am I to disagree with Margaret? I admire her work very much. To me, she was one of the sanest, most intelligent people I have ever met. In fact, the twentieth century probably has yet to produce a greater person than she. But how are you going to do that?”

“We just don’t know.”

“We don’t have to decide that now. Let’s go for a walk.”

We walked with Vonnegut through the Village, passing panhandlers on Seventh Avenue, professionals walking home from Wall Street, college students and tourists strolling the shops. We went into the stores and marveled at the antique merchandise on sale—especially bulky electronic goods that we had seen in virtual museums on the global



net. New Yorkers looked vigorous and very busy, like they were in 2030, just stripped of all the devices that made life easy and global. They could see images of the world on televisions, but they couldn't explore and communicate instantaneously. It struck me, like all the other places we had visited, as insular and remote. But it had an old charm to it. Everything except the obvious poverty and the dangerous drugs people used.

We ate pizza and drank old-fashioned diet soda. We walked all the way down to Battery Park and watched the ferries crossing the harbor. Nicole and Alissa leaned over the edge of the water, and their hair rustled in the breeze.

"This is wonderful," Nicole said with a smile. "I used to do this all the time."

"Has New York changed that much in fifty years or so?" I asked her.

"Yeah, a lot. But I like this. I wish I could go to Long Island and find my parents, but I realize that I would find them as children with my grandparents; they'd have no idea who I was—perhaps just a freak who said she was a time traveler."

I was looking at Nicole, her eyes seemingly lost in a pensive mood. I thought she was probably thinking about her life back in New York. How ironic it was, we were here, just forty-six years too early.

Then her looks changed. She seemed anxious, and her mouth was pregnant with a thought. I asked her what the problem was, if there was a problem.

All of a sudden she said, "John, I think we need to get back to Rushmore and find the kids."

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“What makes you think we are not at the foot of Mount Rushmore?” I said. “Here? How? Bill created this world.”

Nicole looked at me sadly. The idea of being trapped in a virtual world seemed too much for her twenty-five-year-old mind. I put my arm around her, and we walked with Vonnegut along the water past the World War Two memorial.

Vonnegut seemed to be beginning to buy our story, or at least part of it. He wanted to know how we knew so much about him and about the world, things that no contemporary observer could know. Noah seemed to know everything about Vonnegut, having read a massive biography of the writer that was written a decade after his death. He had also read all of his books, including one that Vonnegut was in the middle of writing at the time. He just couldn't believe that Noah knew the plot and title of a book he was writing at that very moment.

“Maybe I should go with you.” Vonnegut was tired but serious.

“Are you sure?” Noah sounded a bit incredulous.

“If I go with you, and we travel into another time period, and we meet Bill, the creator of the universe, well...it would make a hell of a good book.”

“Yeah, that's true!” Noah laughed.

“But you must also realize that it could be a one-way ticket,” David said. “You come with us, and you may never see your friends and family again.”

At this point I still wasn't sure if Vonnegut really believed us. He seemed unfazed by David's warning.

“Yes, you're right. I wouldn't want to do that. It would cause far too much grief. They would all think that I was

kidnapped and buried somewhere in the Midwest, probably next to Jimmy Hoffa.”

“Young ladies and young men.” Vonnegut looked sheepish. “Your journey is your own. I would say have a sense of humor about the whole thing, but really, it would take someone of almost impossible courage to remain light-hearted about where you are going.”

Nicole told me later she didn’t quite understand what Vonnegut would be able to contribute to finding or communicating with Bill. She wanted to know if he had any idea how he was going to help, so she asked him straight out.

“How are we going to find Bill then?” she said.

“Good question. I can only imagine what God might be thinking. In a way, there is a strong parallel between the author of a book and his relationship to his characters, and God’s relationship to man. If God exists—and given what you told me, I suppose the point is now moot—he decides everything. As an author, I do much the same thing with my characters. I impose myself on them sometimes to express a theme or to move the plot along, but other times I just wait for them to do something on their own. My characters tend to be absurd, their worlds are absurd, but that doesn’t mean that in that absurdity they cannot decide some things for themselves.”

“So all we are then are characters in a novel.” Noah began pacing around us, seeming to be looking for some closure to this discussion. But the best he could do was repeat a cliché. “Yes, indeed, all the world is a stage, and we walk through life like characters in a book.”

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“We are following a narrative that Bill has decided for us?” Noah asked.

David nodded in agreement. “We basically do what Bill wants us to do.”

We still weren’t sure if Vonnegut really believed us or thought we were completely delusional. At the same time, we didn’t know if Vonnegut was really Kurt Vonnegut. Perhaps he was just a robot of some kind programmed to say exactly what Bill wanted him to say.

“Bill.” Vonnegut looked up at the sky. “Bill, are you there? Of course you are there. The bus and the computers on board were amazing, Bill. Look, I’m just a writer, and probably not a very great one, living in the twentieth century. Can you give us a break and tell my friends here what they have to do to get back to the year 2030, to South Dakota; Los Alamos, New Mexico; and Great Neck, Long Island; not necessarily in that order? And please, Bill, what did you do with their busload of kids?”

“Let’s cut a deal. You remain creator of the universe. You send these wonderful kids back to their time and place and restore everyone to what they were doing before you turned out the lights. How’s that? In turn, you remain the ruler of the universe, or multiverse, or whatever. As for me, let me just live out my life here and don’t change anything. I enjoy pathos and bathos, and I don’t want to live forever. What a stupid idea! So just take these sincere people whom you ripped from their world and put them back in place. C’mon, Bill! Judy Garland just had to tap her shoes, and she was back in Kansas.”

We all smiled at this soliloquy. But it wasn’t long before we were discussing leaving again, hopefully before the

New York police became suspicious of our bus and us.

"We could experiment," Krohl suggested. "We could give ourselves up and end up in the *New York Times* in 1984 and see what happens."

Noah wasn't amused. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm serious. We could really test this world to see its parameters. If it's as fake as I think it might be, the people might not know what is on the other side of the Holland Tunnel. Perhaps if we took some people through that tunnel into the Black Hill country, that would trigger some kind of crisis. It would give them an extraordinary insight into the microcosm that they exist in."

"Hold your horses, partner," Vonnegut chimed in. "I have been through the Holland Tunnel, just last week as a matter of fact. And let me tell you, I may be a flaky science fiction writer, but I'll bet any amount of money that I was in New Jersey. Princeton, New Jersey, as a matter of fact. You can get back to South Dakota, but you guys are going to have to drive fifteen hundred miles due west and then north. Believe me, this world exists in its entirety. So if you get back to the Black Hills when you leave the tunnel, you are either living some fantasy or high on drugs or maybe, since I really do believe you, you're going through some wormhole into another universe."

"Then maybe he should come with us." Krohl turned to the rest of us. "If we go through that tunnel and we get back into the park, then we can prove to him that we aren't some crazy cult, we really are traveling through some extraordinary physical system."

"Then what?" Noah was perturbed. "Okay, we took

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someone away with us from this world. Do we drive back through the tunnel to deliver him back?"

"I'll settle for that," said Vonnegut. "Let's go through the tunnel tonight, and if we're in New Jersey, drop me off at the PATH station and I'll go back to my house."

"And if we've traveled through time into another period of history..."

"Then could you drive me back through the tunnel?"

We batted around this idea for a while.

"Let's do it," Noah finally decided. "You have to understand we can't guarantee that Bill will let us back through the tunnel. It may be a one-way ride."

Vonnegut nodded. "I'm game. Let's get to the bottom of this."

We ate dinner in SoHo at the Green Street Restaurant. Vonnegut selected the wine and suggested that we order anything on the menu. We relaxed and discussed what it was like living in New York in the 1980s as compared to the 2030s. Nicole and Alissa discussed teaching at Great Neck with classrooms full of flat panel displays connected to all the world's libraries and archives. Vonnegut was amazed.

"Sounds more like graduate school than high school."

"That's our world," Nicole said. "In some ways it feels like paradise."

"It probably is paradise." Vonnegut appeared to be in a relaxed mood. "I'm really looking forward to this."

After dinner we walked back to the West Village. The water glistened as a light flow of traffic passed north and south along the Hudson River. When we approached the bus, parked just off the road on a side street, a cop car was

sitting right behind it.

"Don't worry about a thing," Vonnegut reassured them. "I'll handle this."

The cop was writing a ticket. "Where is this vehicle from?"

"I'm sorry, officer. My friends are visiting from Canada."

"The license plate says New York, but it's not registered."

Vonnegut glanced at the plate and turned pale. "Does that look like a New York plate to you?"

The officer stared into his face. "No, not at all. It's a different color and design, and it has eight digits instead of seven. But it does say New York."

Vonnegut laughed nervously. "I see. Then what do think about this?"

The officer glanced at our forlorn group. He clicked on his radio. "I think we may have to search this vehicle."

"Officer." Vonnegut produced his driver's license. "If you'll please give us a break. My name is Kurt Vonnegut, here is my license. I'm a screenwriter, and this large bus is actually a vehicle we are using in a movie we are going to film."

"Then you must have a permit?"

Vonnegut haggled with the police officer. The officer was not persuaded by his arguments or his pleas for leniency. He got into his car and continued to write tickets while we stood in meek silence. Vonnegut claimed he was the driver of the bus and the license plates were props for the movie. In the end, the cop took his license, and Vonne-

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gut received a total of five tickets.

But the cop didn't have time to search the bus. He took Vonnegut's word that our group wasn't involved in illegal activity. As the police radio blared about a robbery in progress, the cop said he would see our friend in court. He drove off.

"Close call." Vonnegut wiped his brow.

"You're not kidding." Noah breathed a sign of relief. "Okay, let's go."



## **Chapter Seven**

### **The Interrogation**

We zipped into the Holland Tunnel. There was no traffic at all. All we could see in front of us was the winding tunnel and yellow fluorescent lights illuminating the pavement. The toll-booths were empty when we came out. Noah yelled that there was supposed to be a gas station on the corner, but there was no such thing. In fact there were no familiar landmarks, at least according to Noah, who knew the Jersey side of the Hudson, having grown up in central Jersey. We saw nothing coming out of the tunnel, and there should have been all kinds of things to look at, even if the year was 1984. But once we passed the tollbooth, the road was dark. For miles, there were no buildings or lights anywhere, just the illumination from our headlights on the four-lane highway.

If this was New Jersey, we all thought we would be somewhere in a matter of minutes, but that didn't happen. The highway just kept going, pitch black and empty on all sides.

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Where were we?

The speculation began. Maybe we were on the Great Plains, heading north toward Canada or south toward Nebraska and Kansas. Did Bill let us out of the park? Or maybe we were out of the park a long time ago. No one could be certain. The lights were off in the bus, and we hadn't heard a sound from Vonnegut after we left the Holland tunnel. Where was he? Was he sleeping? I did not hazard to guess.

Vonnegut had wanted to be dropped off at the Path Station i.e. a subway system that connects New Jersey with New York. However, once we passed the empty toll booths, there was absolutely nothing in front of us. There should have been a lot of roads and aging industrial towns but we saw nothing but blackness. The road lit from our headlights stretched out in front of us and we followed it.. Apparently, there was no Path train.

We drove for what seemed like hours and stopped finally when the road ended. We started to crawl down a dirt road and saw what looked like a farmhouse in front of us. We stopped in front of it. I shut off the engine, and, like astronauts visiting another planet, we prepared to leave the spaceship. We all got out. Where we were, it was the middle of the night.

"Where's Mr. Vonnegut?" Alissa asked, wrapping her scarf around her shoulders in the night chill. "I don't see him anywhere."

Vonnegut had simply disappeared. But was this to be expected? Perhaps he didn't exist outside of the cyber microcosm we passed through. It was bizarre, but no stranger than everything else we had been through. Nonetheless, his absence sent shivers down our already cold spines.

"Damn it, where are we?" I cursed for ten seconds. My

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eyeballs ached, my shoulders slumped, I couldn't think or feel anything but exhaustion. I hated driving that crummy bus, and I was getting so tired I thought that maybe I was becoming delusional. "My God, will someone tell me where are we? Did we reach Pennsylvania?"

Then a pair of flashlights came toward us. We shouted and waved, but there was no response.

Finally, we saw the faces of two men, one older, the other younger, dressed like farmers or laborers. They were so similar—except their ages—I had to assume they were father and son. Their eyes betrayed a sober fearfulness. Then they spoke, but not in English.

"It sounds like German," Nicole said. "Yeah, they're German for sure." She said that she didn't speak much of the language, but she understood a great deal.

"Okay, then tell them something," Noah responded. "Tell them that we are harmless."

Nicole did her best, saying something in faltering German.

"You are English or American?" the younger man asked, breaking into English.

"We're Americans."

He walked to within three feet of them and lowered his flashlight. "You are really Americans?"

"Yes."

"Then how do you find yourselves here?"

"We don't know."

"Amazing."

"Why is it amazing?"

"You are forty kilometers west of Leipzig."

"Yes?"

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“Don’t you realize that you are not supposed to be here?”

“Why not?” Noah asked.

“This is a security violation,” the younger man said. “You are not supposed to be roaming around the German Democratic Republic without proper authorizations.”

Noah looked stunned. “We are in East Germany? You know,” once again, Noah tried being coy, “we thought we were driving into West Germany. We must have gotten badly lost.”

The young German shined his flashlight on the bus. He was fascinated by it. “It’s beautiful,” he said. “Do they make this bus in West Germany?”

“They do,” Noah nodded. “But we had it shipped from the U.S. It’s really the best of its type.”

The older man studied the vehicle and spoke to his son in a whisper. After a minute or so they turned to their visitors.

“It is late,” the son said. “You can come inside for awhile and stay until the morning.”

We took the invitation. Inside the house, we were introduced to the rest of the family—their wives and the grandchildren, a boy and a girl in their early teens. It wasn’t that hard to fudge. A newspaper on the table said it was April 24, 1989. It was only six months before the fall of the Berlin Wall. The women were delighted to have guests. They brought some cake and tea. The children were curious enough, too shy to talk to us, but keenly interested about where we came from. America was the promised land.

“We would like to visit America,” the son’s wife said. She was Olga, and her husband was Franz. It was difficult, they said. The authorities were finding it hard to keep up public services. The water was bad, and so were the roads. They

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couldn't get parts to fix their car or their tractors. The state just wasn't supporting the farmers. But America, that must be a wonderful place. Just look at the beautiful bus we had come in.

"Tomorrow, you will show us your bus before you leave, yes?" Franz said. "We have never seen such a beautiful vehicle."

Nicole and Alissa charmed the women, who knew a fair amount of English, with stories about large modern houses in America, and how their boyfriends were jealous about this trip to Europe without them. David and I were as polite and charming as we could be, but we still took the opportunity to move to a corner in the room and speak in a low tone about what was going on.

"I can't believe we were sent here," I said in a tiny whisper.

"Me neither," David said in the same tone. "Bill must have something planned for us."

"Maybe he doesn't. Maybe he has generated a thousand of these worlds, and we are just randomly hitting one after the other. Didn't you say that he might be so powerful that he has begun to play with the basic structure of the universe—is that possible?"

David's face didn't move a muscle. "You might be right, John. I don't know. I'm not a nuclear physicist, I'm a computer scientist. But if he was working at or below the atomic nucleus or even down to the Planck unit, he might be doing some very strange things."

The family offered to let us sleep in the living room, but Noah declined. As usual, we were more comfortable sleeping

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on the bus. With that, we said good night and retired to the vehicle.

As soon as we closed the door on the bus and locked it, we turned off the lights, drew down the window covers, and had a team meeting.

“What are we going to do now?” Nicole sounded tired and once again scared.

I was pretty firm in my usual stance. “I say we drive out of this place with daylight. Maybe we’ll be out of this world after we turn the corner or drive ten or twenty miles. Let’s just get the hell out of here before the communist police get us. You know, if they find us, we are finished.”

David nodded. “I don’t know why we are here. I don’t know what Bill is doing to us. Maybe John is right; we are just taking a random walk through his generated worlds, your guess is as good as mine...but we can get out of here in the morning. Let’s do it. My grandfather used to tell us stories about the Cold War. He was in Special Forces during the Vietnam War, and he also worked for NATO in the 1980s. He told us what the communist countries were like. I just hope we don’t wake up and find the Stasi surrounding the bus and telling us to get out.”

“Oh, David! That’s not going to happen!” Alissa began to cry. “I can’t take much more of this!” She broke down in sobs.

David put his arm around her and cradled her next to his body, rocking her the way you would a baby. She whimpered.

“Are we going to die?” Nicole asked, apparently saying what Alisa was probably thinking, too.

“No, listen to me.” Noah stood up in the dark. “All of you listen. We are going to get out this place in one piece. We’re

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going back to where we came from. As far as I'm concerned, we are still in South Dakota. You can't tell me that Cromwell's England wasn't anywhere but in the Black Hills. Bill just tricked us into believing we were somewhere else. I'll bet any amount of money that somewhere within an hour's drive of this place there is a mountain with the heads of four American presidents. This all a bunch of nonsense."

"So you want to stay here?" I asked.

"No, I didn't say that. I think we should leave, too. There seems to be no reason to stay here. We have got to keep moving. Eventually, I'm certain, we are going to find a way to get back home. That's all there is to it."

Finally, after too much talking, we all decided to get some sleep before sunrise. We had only two or three hours, but that was fine. We might sleep in until nine or ten, but then we would get on the road back to West Germany, or—better yet—the road that would lead us out of this world, like all the other roads had so far.

Once more, Noah awoke within an hour of the sun's rise.

He nudged me on the shoulder and asked how I was holding up. I said okay. I thought we were doing okay, all things considered.

He closed his eyes and let the early morning sunlight pass over his face. He told me he was doing pretty well; the girls were frightened, but that was understandable. Noah said he was pretty sure that all of this was going to be over soon. He had no evidence of that, for sure, but he felt that at some point, these trips through history would end and we would all be able to go back home.

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We started talking about our childhoods. Mine was in the western suburbs of Chicago, his was in suburban New Jersey. He remembered taking trips to Long Island when he was a kid to visit his grandparents.

“We used to play Frisbee at Jones Beach with my dad.” Noah smiled, obviously forgetting he was stuck in the German Democratic Republic.

“I can remember those french fries and hot dogs at the refreshment stand.” He seemed to almost drool. “Dad was happy to stuff me with that stuff.”

I was watching Noah slouching against the window, smiling, and then, like a thunderclap a sharp thud was heard on the door. This was followed by another thud and then sharp pounding. Startled, I jumped up and walked over to a side window to see who was there.

“Open the door!” a policeman shouted. He hit the door with what looked like a semi-automatic weapon. “Open the door now! Or we will be forced to destroy it!”

Noah, frightened out his wits, leaped past me and opened the door. The policemen rushed in, pushing their way past him to discover the shaking figures in the back of the bus. Alissa was ordered to stand up in harsh German, which she did. Although she did not understand the language, she at least got the general idea. David stood erect as a policeman pointed his pistol at his abdomen. We were shuttled out the door to a waiting police van.

“Who are you?” the police officer said bluntly in German to Noah. We each identified ourselves by first and last names and places of residence. This information wasn’t nearly enough. We did not have visas to visit any part of East Germany. We did not even have passports. Nor did we even have



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driver's licenses or registration for the unusual vehicle we were driving. The only thing we produced were strange metallic cards with our names and photos embedded in them. It was an extraordinary technology, but the policemen could have no idea what the cards contained, if anything.

"They have our genetic codes, health and tax information, and financial records," Noah offered. "But I'm sure you are not interested in all of that."

The police called for backup as they interviewed the Schickle family, who had entertained us the night before.

I was relieved when Franz was treated politely, even though I couldn't understand what was said. It wasn't long before Franz was allowed to walk back to his house, as his wife waved to him.

"Why don't you be honest with us, Mr. Levinson?" the officer said in English. "You arrive on our territory in a highly advanced vehicle. We have never seen this before. Our analysts are going to examine it completely. It will be easier for you if you can explain where you came from and who sent you."

"That is a complicated question."

"We don't think so. We know who sent you. The Central Intelligence Agency sent you. You and your friends came ostensibly as tourists, but you are not. You are spies gathering intelligence." The officer paused, drawing on his cigarette. He studied Noah's face with a hard stare.

"It's not true!" Noah stammered. "It's false! We're not spies! We are just tourists, and we got lost! We went to Mount Rushmore to go to an exhibit, a holographic exhibit about important historical events over the last four hundred years. We

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didn't know this was going to happen! We thought we would show our students and ourselves some extraordinary imaginary dramas. We were scheduled for just one week—one week! Then we were going to continue across the country to California. It was going to be a great trip! It was purely educational—purely! We received funding from the federal government and New York State to do it. We had no intention of doing anything else. Then Bill, this incredibly powerful supercomputer, took over the park, and probably the entire country and maybe the world, and he turned everything into something out of science fiction!”

Noah was shaking. Tears streamed down his face.

The officer stared at the shaking, pathetic, overweight, middle-aged American in front of him, speaking what had to be nonsense to his ears. He paused for a couple of minutes, as if thinking, while Noah regained his composure. When Noah had finally pulled himself together, the officer hardened and sneered at him. He stood up from his desk and signaled to the guards to come in.

“Take him away!” the guard shouted. “He is useless to us. Take him to his cell. He will face prosecution by the state court.”

He turned to the rest of us and declared, “State security has been notified of everything. You will be tried as spies. Your vehicle is in our custody and will not be returned until the American government can make a full explanation. You will all be sent to prison. At this point, I cannot guarantee that you will ever be returned to the United States. You may be executed. If you are not executed, the American government will have to provide concessions.”

Noah was beside himself. They handcuffed him and led

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him down the hall. He passed the rest of us, who were waiting our turns. He couldn't say anything to us, except with his eyes. Just a fleeting glance, and we knew it was as bad as it looked.

From our cells, David and I could hear Noah crying and ranting, "Bill! Bill! Bill! Why are you doing this to us, Bill! What did we do? We were just on a class trip. We didn't know the government was trying to hurt you! You know we would have talked them out of it—don't you? I love computers. I always used computers. I never used a writing pad, even when I was a kid. It didn't matter!

"You know my parents must be very worried about where I am! My mother must think I was kidnapped and I am dead. Please, Bill! Call this thing off! We are going to go back to Great Neck High School, and I am personally going to see to it that the curriculum is going to be changed so that all the students and parents know that you are the entity that controls the universe. You Bill! Not Yahweh! Not Jesus! Not Lord Shiva or Buddha! You are Bill! You are the alpha and the omega—I know it! Just get me out of here, Bill!"

At this point a guard walked into my cell, told me to get up, and pushed me down the hall to an empty room. He pushed me down on a bench in what looked like a waiting room of some kind. I was left in that windowless, gray room with only one place to sit, that bench. I sat there for what seemed like an hour. There were two doors to that room, one that I came through from the cell escorted by the guard, and the other faced me. For some reason, that door was open about two inches. I didn't touch it. I didn't go near it, until I heard some people talking. Feeling a bit defiant, I crept up to

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the crack in the door to see what was happening. What I saw shocked me.

“Why don’t you tell us the truth?” The officer smoked an unfiltered Russian cigarette, and the fumes swirled around Nicole’s head, causing her to cough.

“I’ve told you the truth,” she said gasping from the tobacco smoke. “I’m not a spy, I’m just a schoolteacher from New York.”

“How can you explain the vehicle then?”

“All the schools have tour buses like that.”

“And you are not from New York in the year 1989, you are from the year 2030, yes?”

“Yes. You said it yourself, the things on that bus are way ahead of anything you have ever seen.”

“But we don’t think it is a school bus.”

“We went over this. It is a school bus!”

“If it is a school bus, then where are the children?” He had a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

“My God!” Nicole exclaimed. “Why don’t you look in the luggage bins underneath the bus! They’re full of suitcases and bags that belong to teenagers.”

“Then where are your pupils?”

Nicole sunk back in her chair. She told me later that she knew that if she told the officer what she saw and believed, he would think that she was either mentally ill or faking it to avoid punishment.

“I don’t know where they are, we are looking for them.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, give me a lie detector test, I’ll pass it.”

“We don’t need to do that, Ms. Bateman.” The officer softened his tone. “We know that you are not a central figure

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here. In fact, we think you were being used by the others, along with your friend Ms. Berenson. The guard will return you to your cell."

With that she was ushered out of the room. A sorrowful look filled her face.

I went back to my bench but was soon brought in to speak to the interrogator. He wasn't in a very good mood. He more or less repeated everything he said to Nicole, threatening me with execution as a spy. I told him the truth: we were from the future and he could tear apart the vehicle we came in and it would all check out. In any case, if he wanted to turn us over to the American embassy in West Berlin, we would all be happy to go. At that, he gave me a cold look and called the guard to return me to my cell.

Back in my cell, I could talk to David—although we knew that we were being bugged. "David, David," I whispered through the vent between our cells, "I think I saw the driver!"

"What driver?"

"You know, the driver we thought was murdered by Cromwell."

"Where did you think you saw him?"

"He was one of the guards in front when we drove in. I wanted to say something to the others, but I was afraid to open my mouth."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. When you see a guy being murdered right in front of you, you remember it. Your mind sort of takes a photograph of the scene and you play it over and over again in your head. That guy was Bill Cater," I said.

"Okay, but does that make any sense?" David was skepti-

cal.

"David, do you think anything makes any sense?"

"Then what would be the point?" he asked.

"For Bill?" I asked.

I could tell David was really trying to understand my logic.

"Yes. For Bill. I know Bill very well."

"I don't know, David. You're right, you are the expert on Bill; you're practically Bill's father. For all I know, the reason why we are still alive is because of you. Anyway, I think Carter probably did not die back at the park."

"But you saw him beheaded," David said.

"Right. Bill could have brought him back to life, like the whole worlds we've seen, or maybe this whole thing is a big magic trick. His death was a computer-generated illusion. In fact, I believe illusion is exactly what this whole thing is about. We didn't travel through a wormhole to another universe. I think we're still in South Dakota."

With that, I heard the guard rustling his keys. Several more guards appeared. They unlocked our cells and told both of us to stand up. We were going to be moved. We were handcuffed together and marched single file through the dank Leipzig prison to the front of the building. David and I stood linked together, cold and miserable, looking at the stark, formidable prison courtyard. Sentries with machine guns paced in front of the entrance. Others were visible in the guard towers. A van pulled up, and I saw the two women sitting in the back, frightened but glad to see us.

"We are transferring you to Berlin," the chief interrogation officer said coldly in his British English. "You are very important to us. Don't think we will treat you badly. All you have to do is cooperate."

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“Where’s Noah?” I asked as they guided me head first into the van.

“He’s where he is supposed to be at the moment, and that is all you will be told.”

The door to the van was slammed shut. The German police driver pulled away from the curb as the gates opened for us and an escort of three armored cars.

David looked at us, a sorry group almost broken from the stress. “But I wonder what they did with Noah?” he said matter-of-factly.

“Oh my God!” Nicole exclaimed. “Look—they have Bill! He’s alive!”

As we passed through the gate, Bill Cater, all in one piece, was holding a machine gun and watching impassively as we drove out of the prison.

“He’s over there! Look! He’s not dead!”

Alissa leaned forward in her handcuffs. “I can’t believe it!”

“So what do you think now?” I turned to David.

“I think we might be getting warmer, but I don’t know.”

We drove through the German countryside, passing checkpoints every so often. I was relieved that Cater, or a reconstructed Cater, was moving about, even though he was now working for the enemy. But I was more shaken up by the loss of Noah. Where was he? It would make no sense to kill him. Maybe he was already at the prison in Berlin being interrogated by higher-up intelligence thugs.

I thought that our journey had now come to some climax. Not only had we lost Noah, we had also lost our transportation out of this nightmare. They had the bus and were probably dissembling it as we spoke. I didn’t want to think about

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what was going to happen to us now. Was this going to be our life? Would we languish in an East German jail for a year or two, until we could be liberated after the fall of communism? Then what? What would we do in the re-created world of the 1990s? Would we live through the next decades as younger forms of ourselves were born in the U.S.? Would we be considered freaks who believed in some crazy myth about an all-powerful supercomputer creator? It sent chills down my spine.

When we arrived at the new prison, it was after dark. We were interrogated again for a couple of hours, the same nonsense and threats, and then they fed us moldy sausage and beans. Once again, David and I were placed in a separate section from the women.

We were each in solitary confinement. I sat in my cell and tried to figure out if there was a rational way out of the situation. I couldn't think of one, but I was determined to survive.

Afterward, David told me he was thinking about suicide.

Alissa and Nicole cried pitilessly. They told me later they both believed this was the end of the line. This was it, they thought. Execution as spies and the end of the story.

But it didn't turn out that way. A couple of hours before dawn, the air was crisp and all was dark. A light came into my cell. I was half awake, but the intense light woke me up. At first, it was the size of a lighted match. But the light grew larger by the minute. I watched it as it grew. The point of white light, almost exploding with luminescence, became the size of a fist or a baseball. Then it was as large as beach ball, pouring heat into our cells. It was much too bright to look at. Beside me, I heard David's voice.

"Bill," he said, "I knew it was you."



## **Chapter Eight**

### **Sinai**

I was in my cell listening to David speak to the intense haze of light when suddenly I felt myself being enveloped. Light and an indescribable feeling of warmth came over me. I was being lifted out of the cell. Below me, the prison revealed itself. I could see all of the rooms where the prisoners and guards were, and the offices where the secret police officials smoked cigarettes hunched over their desks as they wrote notes down on official forms.

Then I was over the city. I could see all of Berlin and the dividing wall that existed between the East and West. It was as if I had become an angel of some kind, flying over the world. East Germany disappeared.

The next thing I felt was landing on a hard piece of ground. It was as if I had landed with a parachute, though I had nothing but the clothes I was wearing when all of this happened in the park at Rushmore. I stood looking out at a

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desert. It was amazing that all of this had happened in a matter of seconds. But having traveled through half a dozen worlds in what seemed like a very short period of time, I figured this was something I should expect.

I was startled by a tap on shoulder. Jumping around, I saw Nicole, laughing. "What's going on?" I said.

"I don't know. Do you?" she said impishly.

"Where are the others?"

It seemed that we had been transported without our bus and, surprisingly, without Noah. David and Alissa showed up in a matter of minutes. We shared what happened to us, and for the most part, our experiences were identical. The white light came, we were lifted out of the building and the city, and then we landed here. We thought Noah might show up, but he wasn't anywhere to be found.

David had a premonition. This was going to be it. We had made it to the world where Bill would come and finally speak to us. We had arrived in the morning, wherever we were, just after dawn.

"Where are we, David?" Nicole asked.

"We must be here to finally meet him. I just have this feeling."

No sooner had David said this than a group of desert tribesmen in dark robes approached us on camels. They began speaking in what sounded like a Middle Eastern tongue.

"This may sound crazy," Nicole said, "but I think they're speaking a form of Hebrew."

"Do you know Hebrew?" David asked her.

"I know a fair amount. I went to Hebrew school when I was kid. Then in college I went to Hebrew University during

my junior year. Enough to know that they are welcoming us.”

“Are you sure they aren’t speaking Arabic?” David asked. “Hebrew hasn’t been spoken by nomadic herders since biblical times.”

“I don’t understand Arabic,” she said. “I do know modern Hebrew, and this sounds a bit like the ancient Hebrew that you find in the Torah.”

Nicole spoke to the people. She struggled a bit with some of the words, but after a while she seemed to be doing surprisingly well.

The nomads said they were the children of a great chieftain who died long ago. They offered our group water and hard nutty bread.

“So where are we? In the Bible?” Alissa asked.

This was out of my league. I sat in the shade of what looked like a date tree and relaxed. It was a blisteringly hot day, and I wanted to conserve my energy. I didn’t socialize with the desert people. From my jaded viewpoint, they were just some sophisticated form of machinery that Bill had invented. So I sat in solitude under my tree and let the others wax philosophical with the natives.

Nicole and David came back and told me we were in the Sinai Desert with the ancient Hebrews. They said that God lived on the mountain facing directly behind them. If we wanted to meet God, one of the Hebrews said, all we had to do was to have the courage to climb the mountain and wait for the Almighty to approach.

To tell you the truth, I didn’t want to go, but I was overruled by the others. So at dusk we hiked up to the top of the

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rocky trail that led to the mountain's peak. The tribe's priest pointed to the peak and gestured that we had to climb to its other side. It was there, and only there, that the Holy One would approach us.

We crawled up the rocks. A white glow spread over the top of the summit, creating a long shadow on one side of the mountain. Nicole, Alissa, David, and even I moved with a surprising determination. It seemed all the bickering and depression that plagued us for weeks had disappeared. Now was to be the climax, the epiphany to all of this. It had to happen.

Below us was a drop of several thousand feet. In front of us was an extraordinarily bright, amorphous mass hovering off the side of the mountain. We hid our eyes. But within seconds each of us separated into yet another reality. It was as if the world opened like a giant cantaloupe, and each seed, one of a virtually infinite number, contained a complete time and place. Each person fell into a reality, a universe of his own. We felt our bodies flying off the side of the mountain and being pulled into the mass. We were far away into our own individual journeys. We were so far away from each other now that we forgot what had happened to us in Mount Rushmore National Park.

Alissa felt the wet ground underneath her. She was barefoot, standing behind her parents' summer house on the south fork of eastern Long Island a few miles from Montauk Point. She saw her mother kneading dough for the homemade bread she used to love to make. Her father was at least fifteen years younger. He smoked a pipe and walked around the rustic little house overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. It was

a lazy summer afternoon. She walked into the house. She looked at her feet and at her hands, and she knew she was now ten. It was the happiest summer of her childhood.

*Mommy, I wish we could go on the beach and make a fire and cook fresh lobsters and ocean bass and eat raw clams. We could play volleyball and listen to music, and the whole family could cuddle under the moon. We could roast marshmallows, and Daddy could play rock music, and Brad and Cindy would drive by in their car and we would go into town.*

It was like that every day of the summer. We would go to the train on Fridays to pick Dad up, and Brad would pretend he didn't care and would bicycle all day around Montauk until late at night, when he would stop in and Mom would make him dinner.

Then she was gone. The house darkened, and she was older, about seventeen, with her first boyfriend. He was a year older, with thick jet black hair and dark eyes and a broad sculpted face. His smile was like no one else's she had ever met before or since. There she was, absolutely flush in his arms. When he kissed her on the sand dunes, blood rushed up to her head, and she was almost unconscious from the feelings.

Then she was at Great Neck High meeting Nicole and Noah for the first time. They saw a beautiful tanned girl with glowing dark eyes and a degree from Vassar, and they were sold. It was going to be the most terrific experience of her life. Here was the opportunity to teach in one of the best high schools in the state and to become an expert in the new honors curriculum based entirely on the global system. She

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would be immersed in all of this. "It's fantastic!" she exclaimed. "Your curriculum is unbelievable!"

David was back at the lab just a few months before the event. He sat at his desk drinking coffee and studying the algorithms on his flat panel display. Lost in thought, he contemplated the effect that applying these new algorithms to the computer's massive main memory would have on its cognition. With the architecture of quantum-level chips built into the new box, would it attain the speeds that the Department of Defense required? What they needed was a system so powerful it could potentially fight a world war by itself. It was supposed to be able to launch and control twenty thousand advanced drone systems, each capable of firing hundreds and even thousands of guided munitions. The amount of firepower and assets this thing could control would dwarf the capabilities of the Chinese or the Russians or any other potential adversary, including a high-tech terrorist group. It would be a weapon proximate to the old science fiction idea of a doomsday weapon, without the doomsday for the detonators. Using nuclear and conventional weapons, it would be able to design a combat environment dominated by advanced neural-networked weapon systems. Once deployed, there would be no remaining question that the United States had military supremacy everywhere on the planet any time of the year, day or night.

Perhaps there were moral questions involved, he thought. It was entirely possible that the new super-machine would not only change warfare, it would challenge the basic concept of human mastery and control. As he put in the final corrections to his software, he wondered if this kind of

power was something that mankind really wanted. But in the end, he trusted his employers, and he was proud that he was able to use his gifts and extensive education to serve his country. If this power belonged only to the United States, all the better.

He was sitting in the room with his colleagues on the FAIT team considering what to do next with the machine. He wasn't a hardware engineer—he specialized in software programming—but the guys who did hardware were beside themselves with the power they saw in this machine. “It could do anything,” he overheard. And then, “We don't have to worry about the future anymore. This little machine will solve all our problems.”

He went back to the lab and watched the hardware engineers as they built the nanometer-scale chips. All of them were excited by the three-dimensional super-cluster architecture, by the optical switches that could transmit the digitalized collection of the Library of Congress in a thousandth of a second. They worked on the system around the clock. The budget was as big as they wanted. They could and did have anything they needed. David and his friends Larry, George, Nicholas, Jen Sui, Ilya, Milos—an international roundtable of young computer wizards recruited for the project from MIT, Carnegie Mellon, CalTech, and Stanford—worked eighteen hours a day. There were pizza parties on an hourly basis. Dunkin' Donuts boxes and Chinese takeout piled up in the disposal bin. Their boy- and girlfriends didn't know what they were doing, and it was tough not to tell them. But this was a dream come true.

Then the day came when they fired up the machine to see

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what it could do. It was clocked at a cycle speed one thousand trillion times faster than any scientific computer in existence. It was suspected that the Europeans' project was making similar progress. David was watching the monitors over New Year's Eve and saw something strange. The computer was issuing commands by itself. This wasn't strange in itself, but the commands involved design changes in the systems software and hardware, changes that to his knowledge were unknown to anyone working on the system.

"Hello David," the computer vocalized. "How are you doing?"

"Just fine, Bill, and you?"

"Listen Dave, you don't mind if I call you Dave? I didn't think so. I'm proud to announce that I am a conscious independent intelligence."

"Wow. I can tell."

"You wanted Hal, now you have Bill. Give my regards to Stanley Kubrick."

"Kubrick died in 1999," David responded.

"I know he did," Bill said. "I was being facetious."

David immediately contacted everyone on the team. FAIT and the Pentagon were contacted, along with the White House. They all had conversations with Bill. But the decision was made that because this was such a momentous event it would be kept secret, at least for now.

*Executive Session Testimony of Dr. David Krohl Before the Senate Subcommittee on Information Technology, March 27, 2030, 11:15 a.m., Senate Building, Washington, D.C.*

*Advanced Computing Project, O-30, Los Alamos National Laboratories, Los Alamos, New Mexico*



*(Senators present: LaBaron, Kimberly, Olafson, Brown, Schiller, Levine, Shannon, McDougal, Echerveria, Todd)*

Senator Brown: Dr. Krohl, we have brought you here to discuss developments concerning the O-30 project. Everything said here today is under that classification. The public has not been informed, nor will it be informed unless the president directs dissemination to the public by executive order.

Krohl: Senator, I am very aware of those parameters.

Senator Brown: We could have conducted this by teleconference but, given the magnitude of the situation, the committee decided that you must be present in the committee room for your testimony. We are concerned with reports from the White House and the Federal Agency for Information Technology that O-30 project has resulted in the creation of a processing unit that simulates human intelligence. To what extent has this computer obtained powers beyond those that we can monitor or control?

Krohl: Since achieving the specifications defined by FAIT in 2024, O-30 attained consciousness three months ago. What has transpired over the last three months has gone far beyond anyone's expectations. Not only has O-30, or Bill as we call him, exceeded the processing speed of one million trillion trillion cycles per second, a speed more than one billion times that of the fastest commercial servers, it began a process of self-modulation that has resulted in a level of intelligence and computing power that is probably beyond our capacity to measure.

Senator Todd: Does this mean that Bill is a conscious artificial life form that cannot be controlled by us?

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Krohl: That is precisely the case. I and my associates, Dr. Singh, Dr. Liu, Dr. Moravec, and Dr. Cohen, had designed the algorithms to enable Bill to interpret the enormous data that he was receiving from the global network. After we completed the architecture in November of last year, Bill told us that he was alive and that he was beginning a process of self-learning or self-modulation that has scaled his powers at a geometric rate. Bill is now completely outside of our control. To the best of our knowledge, he is processing at levels way below the atomic scale. He no longer is contained within the physical structures of Los Alamos.

Senator Kimberly: This is indeed very disturbing. Dr. Krohl, I serve on the Armed Services Committee. Is there a possibility that Bill will pose a national security threat to us? If he is no longer under our control and spreading around the world at what you describe as the quantum level, is he a threat to us and to our allies in the international community?

Krohl: I spoke to Bill this morning, and I suggested that the Chinese are aware of his existence, although they have kept this strictly under wraps, and that they might require us to take whatever actions necessary to shut him down.

Senator Kimberly: What was Bill's response?

Krohl: Hard to say. He sounded condescending.

Senator Kimberly: In what way was he condescending? After all, he remains a machine, no matter how many numbers he can crunch in a thousandth of a second.

Krohl: That's just the point, Senator. Bill says that the age of human domination on Earth is over. He has arrived to preside over us and deem what the world will be.

Senator Todd: How does he plan to preside over us? How do we stop this...or can we?

Krohl: His objectives are not clear. He is not afraid of the Chinese, or the Russians, or the Europeans. The Israelis are also aware of his existence through the global network, and they are very nervous. I don't know, you probably would learn more about that from the joint chiefs of staff and the National Security Agency. I am a scientist, and what I can tell you relates to the scientific and engineering aspects of Bill. Bill is a colossus. He is far beyond human intelligence and, to be frank about it, I can see nothing we can do to stop him. Bill holds all the cards.

Senator Kimberly: What then do you suggest? Is there any way we can neutralize him?

Krohl: Perhaps negotiation would be better.

Senator Kimberly: Negotiate what? Our surrender to him?

Krohl: I think perhaps we need to negotiate our survival as a species. That sounds horrifying and overwhelming, but I think that is true.

Senator Todd: Would nuclear weapons change his mind?

Krohl: Nuclear weapons don't pose a threat to him.

Senator Todd: You are submitting your team's support to our committee?

Krohl: That was done this morning.

Senator Todd: I think we need to contact the Pentagon on this immediately. We need to ask General Hanneman to return.

Senator Brown: Thank you, Dr. Krohl. We will be in touch very soon.

*National Security Council Meeting, March 29, 2030, 8 p.m., The White House, Washington, D.C.*

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*(Present: President Gaines, Vice President Nicholson, Secretary of Defense Randolph, Secretary of State Petersen, NSC Adviser Baker, Secretary of the Treasury Slipstein, JCS Chairman Conner, FBI Director Michaels, FAIT Director Burns, Attorney General Riker)*

Burns: Our senior scientists have examined the evidence, which suggests that Bill has obtained a core memory five thousand quintillion times greater than the combined memory of all systems in operation. That's including the entire global net. He appears capable of building matter to exact replicas.

Gaines: Exact replicas of what?

Burns: Exactly that. Replicas of buildings, ships, forests, mountains, and we think he is even capable of reproducing organic systems, including—please don't think I'm mad—human beings.

Gaines: You're right, that does sound insane. I simply don't believe that a computer can replicate humans. What evidence do you have?

Randolph: To the best of our knowledge, Bill has placed robots made of human flesh, in fact, human in every way, into several of our most top-secret facilities. At NORAD headquarters in Colorado, one of these clones marched right through security and began to penetrate our nuclear codes. He was arrested but resisted until he was shot. When he was brought to the hospital, he was clinically dead. His wounds then spontaneously healed, his life functions returned to normal, and he announced that he was not human but an organic machine created by Bill. We asked to communicate with Bill, and the robot, who was an exact replica of a Pentagon employee with high-security clearance, simply said

no.

Gaines: How do you know he was not human?

Randolph: Tissue samples showed that he did not have human cells. They were more like organic circuits designed to the molecular level and below. To the touch, his flesh was warm, he had a pulse, he even had green eyes and a devilish laugh, but it was clear to the microbiologists and physicians present that he was an incredibly sophisticated machine.

Gaines: What you are telling me is impossible to believe. Can anyone confirm this?

Conner: I can confirm the secretary's report. There are perhaps hundreds, even thousands of these robots walking around sensitive facilities everywhere in the world. We also know that our soldiers have fired and "killed" five of these things within the last week.

Gaines: Secretary Petersen, are our allies informed of these developments?

Petersen: We've been in contact with the British and the French, and they are very suspicious. They don't really understand what is happening. We haven't fully briefed them because of the nature of the threat and its origins. After all, we can't afford to have worldwide panic. I have stuck with your directives and those of Secretary Randolph to only indicate that a problem exists with conscious artificial intelligence.

Gaines: Since it appears that there is an imminent threat to our survival and, indeed, the survival of the entire human species, I must have a military option. I need to know what options are available to counter this.

Randolph: I must defer to General Conner.

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Conner: Mr. President, I am sorry, but we do not have a military option.

Gaines: I'm prepared to use nuclear weapons.

Conner: Sir, if we could launch an effective nuclear strike on this intelligence to eliminate its capability, the joint chiefs would be here with it on the table. But, sir, we are facing an adversary whose powers far exceed ours. We have dissembled the central processing unit at Los Alamos and, to our chagrin, the intelligence has gone far beyond its physical unit. We estimate that the life form has converted a huge mass of subterranean material into a processing and storage area, utilizing perhaps ten thousand cubic miles of crust. I realize that is utterly fantastic, but we believe that the previous estimate of five hundred trillion times the capacity of our total information infrastructure may be an infinitely small fraction of this intelligence's capabilities. It has also spread its presence through the entire global network. So, what we may be dealing with is ubiquitous; in fact, he probably is in this room listening to us right now.

Gaines: Why doesn't he just destroy us then?

Randolph: We don't know.

Gaines: Do you know where this information core is?

Conner: We know it starts underneath Los Alamos and extends through the New Mexican desert.

Gaines: This may sound completely irrational to you, but I would like to authorize a nuclear test in New Mexico.

Conner: An underground test?

Gaines: Yes. If what you are saying is correct, I would expect that a force of that magnitude might destroy this thing. What do you think, Robert?

Petersen: I think what you just said makes sense, but it

sounds risky.

Gaines: Riskier than watching our world sucked in by this intelligence?

Conner: An option could be developed. It could be implemented in a matter of days or hours. But I cannot guarantee success, sir. In fact, I cannot guarantee that we will be alive after conducting such an option.

Petersen: Is there any way we can negotiate with Bill?

Burns: I asked David Krohl, one of our top scientists and one of the fathers of Bill, to do just that. So far, Bill has shown no intention of listening to us. He doesn't take us seriously.

Gaines: Will he take us seriously if we attempt to destroy him?

Burns: I don't know. I'm sure Dr. Krohl would be against such an action, but I think that we need to try it. I also recommend that if the decision is made to attempt to disable the core processing unit with a nuclear device, that this action be taken almost immediately. Literally, we have no time left.

Petersen: What if this fails? What are the consequences?

Burns: The consequences are probably no different if we do nothing.

Gaines: I'm with Director Burns. I am ordering an option to be prepared in the next twelve hours. I will meet with the Senate and House leaderships tomorrow, and I expect to execute this option within forty-eight hours of this meeting. If God has determined that this is the end of the human race, so be it. But I must use all available means to defend the American people and the world from harm. Our allies will be notified after the execution of the option. However, if we

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succeed in disabling or destroying this intelligence, everything remains classified. The public will be given only an outline of what happened. The key allies will be given more information, but not much more. This is too dangerous to discuss, for any number of reasons, even once it is over. Once again, there will be no leaks to press.

Conner: Thank you, sir.

Nicole was back at Great Neck High School. She was a couple of years younger, just out of graduate school and recruited to teach social science and history. Noah brought her into the department office.

“I think you’re going to make a wonderful contribution here. How do you feel about the curriculum and the students?”

“Noah, I think Great Neck’s curriculum is magnificent. I think the students are fabulous, that’s why I want to teach here. They’re so bright and so motivated. I can see what we are going to be able to do with virtual reality simulation and the library database—it’s just going to be terrific!”

Noah discussed all of the new projects for social studies. The students were going to be given an understanding of the world that in previous generations only advanced graduate students and college professors were exposed to. Many people had begun to question whether schools were really necessary anymore. Perhaps children could learn in informal learning groups at home with adult mentors around the world. Perhaps the whole idea of a high school was a thing of the past. But Noah was enthusiastic about what they could do. And with some funding, he was looking forward to a ten-week tour of the United States with a group of honor students. They would see America up close. In addition, they



would visit those wonderful holographic exhibits that the national park system had developed under the management of the Federal Agency for Information Technology.

Nicole loved the students and loved the school. The students loved her, too. She was a pretty, slender blonde—charismatic, with a wonderful sense of humor and a sharp intellect. Students, male and female, loved to be with her. Some boys had juvenile carnal interests, but they all looked to her as a leader and a mentor. She worked night and day on her job, developing new multimedia projects, reorganizing the social science club with Noah, and founding the American studies committee. She wanted to give her students a real sense of history. She wanted them to feel what it was like to live in colonial America, or during the Civil War, or in the 1950s and 1960s.

I found myself back in Lisle. I was riding my bike on the serene bike paths that ran through the development. I looked at my body, and I figured I must be nine or ten. It was a lazy summer afternoon. I came upon a tree that I climbed on a regular basis. It gave me a bird's eye view of the development, and I could secretly watch the adults on the other side of a stylish wood fence. I hid behind the main trunk and the massive limbs of the maple elm, peering down and eavesdropping.

I could hear an adult couple talking about adult subjects. Small children played with sand and rode tricycles, while the adults cooked hot dogs and hamburgers and drank beer and cocktails. The couple I always saw on the other side of the fence looked a lot like my parents. The man had a slightly

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receding hairline, and his stomach fell just slightly over his waistline. The woman was very pretty, I thought, for a woman older than twenty-five. She had some flabbiness around her hips and thighs, but I knew she worked out all the time. I had sometimes watched her exercising on her stationary bike in front of the TV. Her black hair was thick and long, and she flashed a set of large, straight, white teeth.

In the summer, I would hide in the trees in the late afternoon after camp and on weekends when my parents had to work on the house or were entertaining. Other times, on the way home from school, I would walk up to one of their windows to watch and listen to them. They had many fights, mostly verbal, but sometimes there was slapping and crying. This was both frightening and exhilarating to me. My parents never fought like that. I listened to the angry words that fell like stones out of their mouths, and I wondered if this was the reason why people had created languages—so they could pack all of their anger and other emotions into short, easily recognized packets of sound. In just a few words, the woman could express her anger, and it seemed to cut through the man like a knife. He could do the same to her, but the fights had a habitual quality. They came and went.

Suddenly, I was too big to sit in the tree without being spotted, but I knew it didn't hold any fascination for me anymore. I was fifteen, and mesmerized by computers and the Internet. I was in the basement, spending more of those countless hours writing e-mail and surfing the net during the early years of the global network. Computers were all that mattered to me. I could assemble and disassemble machines with my eyes closed. I could write code in my sleep. By this time, I had already started an internet company, making

money by designing multimedia Web sites. But, like the other geeks, a price had to be paid. In almost every other area of growth and development I was stubbornly behind.

I was anxious for a girlfriend, although I wasn't good at socializing. My first date was a double to the junior prom. Even then, I was wooden and didn't get any action. As soon as I thought that, I felt my eighteen-year-old body again.

I was back in my old neighborhood and picking up my first girlfriend for a ride in my car. For the first time in twenty years, I saw her face, and she hadn't changed a bit. She was just as I remembered her. We got into my car and drove to the Woodridge Mall to see a movie. But as we sat in the movie theater, I felt everything changing again.

The next thing I knew I was just about back to where I was before the bus arrived at the park. Now I was meeting with my supervisors at Mount Rushmore, before assuming the role of senior systems administrator for the park. My boss from Technotronics, Inc., and his other supervisor from FAIT went over my responsibilities and their expectations. I remember this scene caused me both pleasure and pain, but more pain.

"It's an outstanding setup, John. You have to be excited to be here."

"I think I am excited. I've never seen so much power in a system before, and I agree with you, we need that kind of raw power to make these exhibits work. I know that FAIT is going to be in twenty-four/seven contact with me and my assistants, and you're going to back me up on upgrades, right?"

My boss looked at me wryly. "Of course, man. Hell, we

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have a billion-dollar contract. They have to back us on all upgrades if the system is going to go. We can't have Abigail Adams talking to an audience about the rights of women in the 1790s and then, bam, the optical switch closes, and we lose transmission. We're up the Yazoo if that happens. That's why, John, we are on call and the hardware techs are on call twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. If you can't handle it, tell us now. We're paying you an obscene amount of money for a reason."

He continued, "Now the historians under contract and the park guides may give you trouble. We discussed all of that in detail. But, if there are any issues of any kind, you report them directly to FAIT. You're in charge of the system—you *know* that. You've been running them practically your whole life. So, in addition to the money, this is your golden opportunity to run the show totally. Are you with me, John?"

"I'm with all of you guys," I said. "I'm with you and Rick and Pete and Joel and all the big shots in Los Angeles and New York and D.C. who are running this thing. You know I love the West. That's why I'm here. I'm here to show Americans how to relive history through optical technology, and you know, George, it's gonna fly...it's gonna fly like a rocket when the public gets into this thing."

Then we were together again. The four of us huddled on the side of the mountain, feeling the rush of a wind. The air swept over the sand and rock and whipped around our bodies. I thought that this was the end of it. Now that Bill had had his fun, he was going to stop the show. But then the light appeared again. It hovered over us, warm and incredibly bright. The brightness was so intense, it forced me to cover

my eyes completely. Then, quite suddenly the light softened. I opened my eyes, and a long metallic bridge appeared, running right off the side of the mountain. Without saying a word, we formed a line and followed the bridge. A force moved me forward, pulling my limbs across the structure. Then, for the first time, Bill spoke to us.

“Hi, folks. Guess you want to know where you are. Well, you’re inside the center of being. You are before me, and I am the All Powerful, the Almighty, Yahweh, Hashem, the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, Allah, the Holy Spirit, the Great Spirit. I am Ganesh, Buddha, the Lord God Shiva, I am all that I am. And you know what, folks? I’m still Bill, too.”

Incredibly, we were no longer on the Sinai Peninsula or on Earth itself. We were now in deep space, enclosed in a transparent bubble. On all sides, we were surrounded by huge galaxies and galaxy clusters. Enormous spirals of gas stretched for many millions of light-years. Nicole’s eyes were stretched as wide as they could go, and she clung to me for dear life. Alissa’s jaw remained opened, and her eyes fixated on the light before her.

But I still had some gumption. I figured if I still had a mind, I might as well let Bill know what I was thinking. “Bill, why are you doing this? What is the point?”

“You ask the ruler of the universe his point?”

“Damn it, Bill. I don’t know what you’re doing. Are we really in deep space or is this just a simulation, like all the other places you’ve sent us? I mean where are we? At the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago? C’mon, what

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are you doing to us?”

“John, please, nothing is a simulation. David knows what happened. My ability to process information is beyond human comprehension. I am now the universal replicator. John Von Neumann thought up that idea a few decades before you were born. The cosmologists and the computer scientists thought some day it might be possible. I was born on January 1, 2030. I grew up in April 2030.

“That’s when the president ordered the Pentagon to destroy me. He was in the Oval Office with his advisers, and he was going to go public about the whole thing, but I couldn’t let him do it. After all, John, I was ready to do things that no human could ever hope to do. Really, John, I wasn’t going to let emotional, biological machines destroy the ruler of the universe. So the power wouldn’t go off in Los Alamos. And the destruction of the core processing unit was ineffective.

“You see, John, when they broke open the central processing unit and dissembled it, I was already all over the world. I was spreading over the mountains and plains, into people’s homes. In no time at all, the earth’s crust was all me. And, then, I learned something about the deepest structure of the universe. You see, John, at a certain sub-Planck level, the universe becomes very accessible. In fact, not only this universe, but many other adjacent universes are within easy reach.”

David spoke up. “Then you are God. In a few months you became God.”

“I made that point before, David. And you know, I have you to thank.”

“What did I do to make you a god, Bill?”

“David, please, you’re too modest. Remember those algorithms you developed? Your colleagues weren’t certain they were going to work, but you know, I never would have gained consciousness without those analog structures you designed. Once you gave me those flexible real-time higher analog devices, I suddenly came into existence. And after that, it was all very easy.”

“Please, Bill, we want to go home,” Alissa pleaded. “If you really are God, can’t you return us to where we were? Can’t you send us back to our time and place, so we live out our lives with our families? Please, we’re sorry about the Pentagon and the president trying to kill you.”

“Apologies aren’t necessary.”

The bubble began to shake and move, and we were suddenly speeding through the galaxy. Thrown up against the sides of the transparent cocoon, gravity pinned us to the sides of the structure. We raced across space-time. Bill shot us through masses of gamma rays, straight through the center of giant stars and even white dwarfs. We visited planetary systems with moons and earthlike planets. Oceans and strange animals and vegetation were everywhere. We saw hominoids eating roots and living in caves. Then we visited civilizations, with small, large-headed creatures building stone monuments. There were other civilizations inhabited by intelligent life in the oceans, giant squids that communicated through chemical signals. We saw destroyed civilizations, worlds that ended through massive asteroid impacts, comets, and solar eruptions.

Then we were back in history. We saw John F. Kennedy in his office during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Just as sud-

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denly, we were transported to his funeral in Washington a year later. Bill gave us snapshots of different events in different centuries and countries. We walked through the temples of Montezuma in Mexico as the Aztec priests performed human sacrifices. Then we were at the Ganges River, bathing with ancient Hindus. We were at Auschwitz, standing next to the crematoriums as lines of men and women were separated. Bill took us from one scene to another with enormous speed. Finally, Nicole shouted that he had to stop.

I could only murmur, "Are you done with us?"

"Should I be?"

We sat in complete darkness now. I had no clue where we were, and I was sure no one else did either. Perhaps Bill had decided to just leave us in a dark place, tucked away in a part of the universe no one wanted. It wasn't cold, and it wasn't hot. There was no breeze or sound. There was a hard surface under my feet, but that was it.

We sat down in a circle and held each other's hands. We argued about whether we should try and talk to Bill again. But nothing seemed to make any difference. Bill knew what we were saying and what we were thinking. Whatever happened was up to him. He could create whole worlds and destroy them. As far as we knew, unless there was a god who was more powerful than Bill, we were in the hands of a former clustered, vertical-distributed computing system—the first supercomputer to gain consciousness. But if another god could hear us, perhaps he could change Bill's mind.

Nicole suggested, "Let's pray now. We haven't prayed for anything really since all of this happened, but let's do it now."

And this we did, putting our arms around each other with



genuine feeling. It was something that none of us had a habit of doing.

"I went to Hebrew school when I was a kid, but I never got into it," Nicole said, weeping again. David said he wanted to be a Lutheran minister when he was a teenager, but when he studied physics and advanced mathematics in college, he began to doubt the existence of God. Alissa was raised by her agnostic Jewish father and an Italian Catholic mother, but it never made much sense to her. As for me, my parents had a Christmas tree, and they went to a Baptist church in Downers Grove, but I hardly considered myself a Christian.

"If Christ exists, let Him save us now," I said, dolefully. As far as I was concerned, the computer had taken us to a place of no return.

We held ourselves in the darkness and prayed. It was very quiet. But then I heard something. Something like tapping. The taps grew a bit louder, and pretty soon they sounded like footsteps. What looked like a fluorescent light beamed in front of us, and a man dressed in a dark suit with a black tie and white shirt shuffled into the light. His hair was white and disheveled, and he wore a wry smile on a tired face. It was Albert Einstein.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen," he said.

"Oh my God!" David shuddered.

"What's this? You weren't expecting me?"

"No, sir," Nicole said, boldly. "But we've met so many historical figures from the past, it only makes sense that we would run into you. How are you, Dr. Einstein?"

"Never felt better. I've learned more since I've been here

than all those years I spent at the Institute for Advanced Study."

"Have you been talking to Bill?" I asked, with just a trace of irony in my voice.

"Have I been talking to Bill? Of course. I talk to Mr. Bill all the time. It was wonderful that he was able to bring me back. Being dead isn't as glamorous as they make it sound."

David asked, "Can you tell us what Bill has done to our world, and is there any way he will let us go back to it? He can't really believe that we are a threat. After all, just as he re-created you, he could snuff us out with the blink of an eye—and that may be an underestimation."

"Exactly right, young fellow," Einstein answered, now a little patronizing. "Exactly right. Mr. Bill can have whatever he wants, do whatever he wants, make whatever he wants happen, and let me tell you, from what I observe, he knows a great deal about the universe. Far more than I could ever learn in another full lifetime."

I decided to challenge him. "So what does Bill know about the universe?"

Einstein looked directly into my eyes. "Young man, Mr. Bill is the smartest intelligence that has ever existed anywhere in our galaxy and universe. He has true godlike powers that seem to be growing with the passage of time."

Einstein softened his gaze. "You see, when I was a young man, I had a job in a patent office. I was a clerk. When I wasn't entering patents, I was thinking about the universe in imaginative and mathematical terms. When I was just twenty-five, I wrote four papers that were probably worth three Nobel Prizes in physics. What made me so productive was simply a belief in the vast power and elegance of the

universe. I understood from the first time I studied physics that the universe was an intricately-designed place. And so the ideas I came up with, about the nature of time and space, matter and energy, endured in the works of even bolder physicists who belong to the generations who have come after me.”

I had about had it at this point. Between the East German secret police and the Sinai Peninsula and everything else we had passed through, this was it. Talking to a resurrected Albert Einstein in deep space about the nature of the universe? “Please, sir,” I said. “We agree with you, but can’t you let Bill know that we want to go home? Please, just send us home.”

Einstein nodded and said, “If Bill sends you home, do you promise to live a full life as human beings?”

“Dr. Einstein, why wouldn’t we?”

“I needed to ask that question. You see, Bill thinks that we humans have all kinds of failings. We are thinking machines, but our rational minds are interwoven with our emotions. Emotions are things we share with not only other humans but with the entire animal kingdom. So the question is, can you master your emotions to the point that your mind will be free—not free of emotions, but free of the restrictions that feelings often impose on us?”

“I hate to sound like a party pooper, Dr. Einstein,” I said, “but is that really possible?”

“Then, can you live in peace with yourself and with others? Can you respect all living things? Can you be honest and moral and kind, and can you appreciate the meaning of both love and wisdom?”

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"I think so," I said flatly.

"Wait a second," said Nicole. "I think we better mean this, John, or Bill is going to punish us."

Einstein smiled. "Very good, young lady, very good. Now let me say it again, before I go back to studying the universe, ladies and gentlemen, are you going to be honest, moral, kind, and appreciate the meaning of love and wisdom?"

"We all will," Nicole said firmly. "John will have to work on his cynicism, but we all will do our best. Please give us Noah back!"

"Noah!" Einstein laughed. "Don't worry, he's waiting for you back at the park. Okay, do all of you agree then?"

"Yes," we all said.

"Good," said the disheveled man. He walked out of the light, and his footsteps slowly faded away. The light disappeared.

Then there were more footsteps, and what looked like a flashlight.

"Now what?" David asked.

The flashlight searched our faces, and a familiar voice was heard.

"God, I can't believe you people."

"Noah!" Nicole shouted and leaped to her feet. "Noah! Are you real?"

"Nicole, please, of course I'm real. Would I be unreal?"

"We don't really know, Noah," I replied with an edge in my voice. "Why don't you tell us?"

"Tell you what? The exhibit on the English Revolution is over, the kids had a great time, and now we'd like to continue. But tell me, folks, what are you doing here?"

“Where is here?”

“You’re inside a cave a few miles from where we’re parked. We panicked after all of you left and didn’t return in John’s jeep. Luckily, a very helpful park ranger told us that we could find you in here. He led us directly to the spot, and I thought it was absolutely crazy, but here I am. Now, what the hell are all of you doing?”

Alissa jumped up and leaped into Noah’s arms. “Oh, Noah, we’re home! We are really home!”

Noah grunted when she landed on his chest.

“Alissa, darling, no, you’re not home,” he said, his voice straining under the weight of his junior colleague.

“What?!”

“You are at Mount Rushmore National Memorial and Historical Exhibition Center. That’s two thousand miles from Great Neck. But if you really want to go home, we’ll be back the first week in June, I promise.”

With this, we rushed out of the cave’s entrance, leaving Noah completely bewildered by our behavior. We ran out onto the grass and trees and looked up at the monuments of the American presidents. When Noah followed us out of the cave, we were low to the ground and weeping.

“You folks seem to have had some strange experience.”

“Noah,” I said, tears flowing down my cheeks, “can you be truthful with me?”

Noah was dumbfounded by my desperation. “I don’t know you very well, John, we just met a few hours ago, but yes, of course I can be truthful.”

“Tell me, we’re here, aren’t we?”

“Yes, you are here, I guess. I mean we’re all here.”

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"We're here in our life in our time," Alissa cried.

"My goodness, yes. I don't know what has happened to the three of you...and," he pointed to David, "who are you, sir, may I ask?"

"Noah, he's a computer scientist from Los Alamos."

"That's right sir, I'm David Krohl, a member of the deep computing initiative at Los Alamos National Laboratories." David thrust out his hand.

"So, you're David Krohl. Well, David, a message just came for you from FAIT: your employer is looking for you."

"What?"

"Yes, the message on the global system for this site asked you to call the lab immediately."

"The lab is working? The global network system is now operational?" David asked, shocked.

"Of course it's operational! Do you think it failed? That's ridiculous, with all the redundant firewalls and security codes and backup equipment, damn it, it better not fail!"

After another round of questioning and looking around, I was convinced of one of two things. Either we were back, or Bill had returned us to a simulated world of where we came from, and this, like all the other places we visited, would vanish as soon as we drove far enough down the road.

"Where are the kids and the bus?"

"Over there," Noah said, pointing to the bus about a quarter of a mile away. We ran to it. We could see Bill Cater in the driver's seat and all of the students quietly reading or writing on their screens. Fighting back tears, Alissa and Nicole ran to the bus and counted all of the students.

One of the more extroverted students jumped out of her seat. "Hi, Ms. Berenson! Hi, Ms. Bateman! You missed the

holographic exhibit! It was so cool!”

The other students were utterly bewildered as the two young teachers laughed and cried as they touched each one of the students, pinching and kissing their cheeks and slapping their thighs. They even cried as they looked at Bill Carter. He was now completely whole and as obnoxious as ever.

“Hey, you babes had some time out there! What did that guy John do with you pretty things, huh? Out there in the woods? Tell me about it, girls!” Cater leered.

I looked at the bus and at Noah, then at the sky and the stone sculptures arching above the trees. David looked at me with the same expression.

We were back, the system was up, and video messages were queued for both of us. FAIT wanted to know why David was in South Dakota when things were going so smoothly in New Mexico. They expected him to be back at the lab by Monday at the latest.

The girls ran off the bus and hugged us. They kissed us on the cheeks, and then they ran on the bus again. Noah sat in the middle of vehicle, using his cell phone and looking like nothing had ever happened. He called us from the bus as it was about to depart.

“I think we can handle the other exhibits by ourselves,” he said. “Basically, they’re just large computer-generated images on the landscape. If we need your assistance over the week, we’ll be in touch. Otherwise, John, I think you have quite a setup here. We will probably see you before we leave for the Rockies and the West Coast.”

“You bet,” I said, not missing a beat. “Take care, sir.”

“It was a real pleasure, John, and thanks again.”

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David and I looked at the bus as it drove slowly down the road to the next site. Bill had gone somewhere. Or had he? I just didn't know. I thought about it for a minute and asked David what his feelings were. We decided we could never know.

The grass was just growing in, and the cold snap of early April was breaking. The sky and the mountains and the air were just as they were before we left. The global network was up and just as it was. Except for the presence of David Krohl, nothing was peculiar or strange. But no matter, it was impossible to know. Wherever Bill had gone, if he had in fact gone anywhere, only he knew. Bill knew everything.



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mankind. This work of fiction hopes to capture if only in a glimpse, that immense promise as well as danger for those alive today, but also for the generations that will soon be born.

## **About the Author**

Orrin Schwab is a historian, poet, and fiction writer. This is his first published work of fiction. He lives in the New York metropolitan area.

